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OR,

The Bald Hornet of the Ozarks.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "NOR'WEST NICK,"
"GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BALD HORNET "ON A SWARM."

"BUZZ-ZZ-Z-ZIP-ZIP! Buzz-zz z-zip-zip-z' spat!"
"Great Scott and little—what's that broke loose?"

For once in his life Owen Price was caught off his guard, his wiry little person shifting from horizontal to perpendicular with ludicrous promptitude as that strange sound came floating through the night.

"Sounds like an overgrown— Hark!"

Rob Kendrick cut himself short as that curious noise came again, nearer and clearer, louder and with a more resonant drone.

"Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip! Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip-z' spat!"
It seemed to fill the night, to crowd the forest, to fairly overflow those rocky, rugged hills.

"I'M THE BALD HORNET O' THE OZARKS, OFF ON A SWARM! HEAD WHITEWASHED
AN' STINGER HONED TO A WIRE-EDGE!"

It seemed to surround the startled friends, roused from a lazy reverie beside their campfire in the Ozarks. It seemed to come from every direction at the same time, yet always to be a little less distinct in whichever direction they turned their eyes.

Yet, all-pervading though the sound seemed, it could hardly be called loud, or a roar. As Rob Kendrick started to say, it sounded more like the buzzing drone of "an overgrown bumblebee," yet with a difference which can hardly be expressed in cold type.

It began with a resonant hum like that attending a swarm of bees in mid-air, gliding into a vicious sibilation close akin to the warning note of an angry rattlesnake, ending with a still queerer sound, which can be rightly interpreted only by one who has intercepted—with his face—the venomous stroke of a big bald hornet.

Owen Price recognized the sound, and as his memory flashed back a full score of years, he gave a subdued yell of alarm, leaping across the campfire with an instinctive slap at his nether limbs as he fancied the buzzing noise concentrating under his blanket.

"Hornets' nest—look out, Kendrick!"

Even as the hasty warning passed his lips, the sound changed to a hoarse bellow, the latter portion of which was drowned by a crashing among the bushes at no great distance from the fire.

"Yar I come, head up an' tail a-sizzin'! Yar I come, stinger out a feet an' leakin' p'izen by the quart! Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip-z' spat! Burr-r-rourk! It's me that's warblin', an' I'm the double-jawed alligator an' moss-backed tarrypin o' the Black Swamp! Burr-r-r-r-o-u-r-k!"

"Mossback Mose! there's your hornets' nest, Owen!" laughed Kendrick, springing to one side just in time to avoid the new-comer, who entered the circle of firelight with a seemingly blind rush.

"The old man's drunk again!" chanted Price, instantly regaining his usual coolness. "Ten dollars or thirty days, Moses Hunter!"

Even the bravest of men might well have thought twice before so boldly facing that wild-eyed, fiery-faced giant just then; but, little though he was, Owen Price never saw the mortal who could inspire him with awe or fear; winged hornets were different!

With a light spring he faced Mossback Mose, shaking a bony forefinger in his face as he pronounced sentence, his thin face grave as that of the judge he was burlesquing, but with a laugh in his pinkish-gray eyes as they met that dull, yet inflamed stare.

"You—buzz-z! You're the critter—heave rocks at my nest, will ye?"

Mose gripped Owen by the shoulder, lifting him clear of the ground and giving him a vicious shake as he growlingly uttered those words. It was a giant and a pigmy!

Those sinewy fingers threatened to crush the bones they closed over, and Price uttered a short cry—of anger, not fear or pleading. Then—his small, hard fists fell *spat-spat-spat!* into that bearded face, leaving the print of each knuckle, and lending a deeper dye to that magnificent yellow beard.

"Burr-r-r-r-o-u-r-k!" croaked the Mossback, giving his mighty arms a swing that sent the little man whirling end over end through the air, to fall sprawlingly on top of a dense, scrubby bush a score feet away.

"Hunter! are you crazy?" sharply cried Kendrick, as he sprang to rescue his friend from that terrible grip.

He was too late to foil that giant swing, and thoroughly angered by the sight—for he hardly hoped to see his chum in life again—he struck hard and swift—blows that would have stunned almost any ordinary man, but which hardly stirred Mose, beyond turning his attention toward this new victim.

"Buzzin' at me, be ye, 'skeeter?" he laughed, his eyes glowing as though backed by electric lights, his hands shooting out and pinioning those muscular arms. "Cockin' yer stinger at the Bald Hornet o' the Ozarks, eh? Buzz-zz-z! Clar the track, fer I'm on a swarm! Hunt yer hole, fer ef I settle onto ye I'll—smother ye a mile deep!"

Just how it was done, Rob Kendrick could never explain. One moment he was struggling furiously with the drink-inflamed giant, the next he was turning end-for-end through the air, to fall awkwardly by the side of Owen Price, while Mossback Mose Hunter was dancing grotesquely around the little camp-fire, plainly giving no further thought to the men of whom he had disposed so easily.

"Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip-z' spat! That's my horn, an' I'm the Bald Hornet o' the Ozarks, off on a swarm! Head whitewashed an' stinger honed to a wire-edge! Wings fresh oiled an' tank full o' p'izen! Who huv rocks at my nest? Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip-z' spat!"

He stopped short in his fantastic dance, working his arms after the fashion of bird or bee hovering, glaring around him as though in quest of an enemy upon whom to vent his resentment.

Price had regained his feet, but little the worse for his involuntary flight through the air, and was dividing his attention between the giant and Kendrick, whose greater weight had

quite completed the wrecking of that scrubby bush.

"I'll heave a bullet if you come prancing this way, Moses!" he cried; but, if heard, his words were not heeded.

"Burr-r-r-r-o-u-r-k!" croaked the giant, carrying out the change from insect to reptile as perfectly as a human being possibly could. "Yar I be, the mossy-back terrypin from Bitter Crick! Adam cut his name in my shell afo' Eve stole the apple, an' I was tired o' swimmin' afo' they was dry lan' 'nough made fer to set toes onto! Burr-r-r-r-o-u-r-k! Room fer the King Snapper, an' dodge yer toes, fer when I ketch a bite my jaws is tight-locked ontel she thunders!"

A series of wild caperings followed, at which Kendrick and Price looked, hardly decided whether to interfere or to keep aloof until this strange being had exhausted himself for the time being.

Neither of them had been seriously injured by their fall, though scratches and bruises were plentiful enough, and their flesh was beginning to smart and tingle where those sinewy fingers had benumbed it for the moment. It had all happened so swiftly that neither man had had time to get angry, as yet, though that condition was being rapidly reached by Robin Kendrick, the younger of the twain.

"I'll thunder you!"

"Steady, old man!" quickly demurred Price, gripping Kendrick by the arm as his hand fumbled at his belt for a weapon. "Look! he's crazy drunk, I verily believe! He has no idea what he's doing—don't you see?"

Mossback Mose abruptly ceased his wild prancing, standing like a figure carved from stone, his eyes glowing redly as the firelight fell across them. His face was turned toward the two men, but though he appeared to be staring directly over their heads as he crouched beside the broken bush, he surely took no note of either one or the other.

Moses Hunter stood a couple of inches over six feet in height, but so perfectly was his mighty frame and muscular limbs proportioned that it was only by contrast with another that his unusual dimensions were fairly realized.

He would tip the scale at two hundred pounds, yet he carried no useless lumber; it was all solid bone, good flesh and tireless muscle.

It was not so easy to tell his age, but those who had known him longest placed it at thirty years, and they were not far out of the way, though there was one thing which rendered this difficult to believe at first.

Back of a naturally high forehead curved a polished dome, bald as the cheek of an infant until the rear third of the skull was reached. There the yellow hair grew thickly, falling to the broad shoulders behind, and joining on either side the magnificent beard which, yellow as new corn-silk and fine as hair of maiden, reached half way to his middle.

A pair of eyes, full, yet not too prominent, naturally as blue as the sky of midsummer; a short, clean-cut, hawk-like nose; large, kindly mouth; full, swelling chest, round waist, long limbs, large but shapely hands and feet.

A hunting-shirt of coarse wool, dyed with butternut, belted at his middle, where hung on either hip an old-fashioned revolver of the ball-and-cap pattern familiar before the Civil War. Heavy trowsers of the same serviceable material, tucked into the tops of coarse, horsehide boots.

Truly, a magnificent specimen of mankind, considered from a physical standpoint; but just now there was something strange, almost repulsive in the picture. For, as Owen Price whispered, Mossback Mose really seemed crazy—if not exactly "crazy-drunk."

"Yip-yah! Yip-yah! Yip-yip-yip!" he suddenly screamed, flinging back his head and shaking it from side to side until his flossy beard formed a yellow cloud before his face, then leaping high into the air and rattling his heels together. "I'm a Missouri mossback, an' Andy Jackson's my prophet! Dimmyerat from crown to sole, from center to circumference, an' all the way back ag'in! Whooray fer Jeff Davis an' Bewreegyard! Whooperee fer Ole Pap Price an' Giner'l Jo Shelby! Glory to the gray, an' double-durn all Yanks! I kin lick—oh-h! give me room 'cordin' to my bigness, an'— Yip-yah! Yip-yah! Yip-yip-yip!"

Higher than before the wild man leaped, rattling his heels like clumsy castanets. Then, alighting, he jerked forth a revolver with each hand, and dancing furiously around the glowing embers, fired shot after shot at random, now with muzzle pointing toward the lowering clouds overhead, now raking the bushes or barking an innocent tree as he gyrated around the fire.

"Crazy as a bed— Look out, man!" spluttered Owen, falling flat to the ground as a shot came in that direction. We'll have to buck and gag the fool, if we don't— Look at him!"

Mossback Mose flung up his hands, the smoking weapons flying far from his fingers. His giant frame shook violently, his lungs laboring like one in the agonies of suffocation. His eyes seemed bursting from their sockets. Froth oozed from his lips and flecked his yellow beard.

Then—a hoarse, choking cry—a drunken stagger—and the man fell to the ground in a limp and nerveless heap!

The two men stared wild-eyed at him for a single breath, then Price sprang forward and stooped over the prostrate figure, drawing back with a startled ejaculation:

"Apoplexy, by glory!"

CHAPTER II.

"FLEE FROM THE WRATH TO COME!"

ROBIN KENDRICK had not entirely recovered from that dizzying flight through the air and the after-shock of falling into the splintered bush, but this unexpectedly sudden ending to that fantastic scene, and the sharp cry given by his friend, urged him forward to the side of the fallen giant.

It was anything but an agreeable sight, roughly though they had both been treated by this man.

Mossback Mose lay like one dead, seemingly without breath. His face was livid, dull gray, with little blotches of purple here and there, as though the blood was already coagulating just beneath the skin. His lips were yellow, tinged with a slimy froth. His eyes were partly open, covered with a dull, glassy glaze, giving them an uncanny, fish-like stare peculiarly repulsive in that dull red light.

"He's not—he *can't* be dead!" Kendrick muttered, shrinking back even as he put out a hand to touch that ghastly face.

"It looks mightily like it, then!" nodded Prince, flashing a look up at the face of his friend as he dropped to his knees beside the sufferer. "But—somehow—it don't look just like—"

With thumb and finger he pusted back an eyelid, gazing keenly into the orb. He passed one hand slowly over that bald head like one feeling for wound or rupture. He opened the hunting-shirt, resting an ear lightly over the left breast. Then, with a quick breath he drew back, half laughing as he ejaculated:

"Apoplexy be—blessed!"

"What? He isn't—isn't it—"

"He's dead—dead drunk!" nodded Price, springing to his feet and daintily flipping his fingers together like one who feels contaminated.

"Thank heaven!"

"That a fellow-being—I suppose he is a fellow-being!" with a skeptical shrug of his slender shoulders. "That a fellow-being is drunken? Fie, Robin Kendrick! I'm ashamed of you!"

"That it's no worse, I mean, of course," muttered Kendrick, bending over the prostrate form, from which came a long, laboring breath: the first he had given since uttering that awful cry.

Kendrick, like many another good and brave fellow, possessed a great, unreasoning horror of death when suddenly confronted by it in another; but, now that he felt assured that Mose Hunter was still living and in need of aid, he forgot himself and all unmanly fears.

He quickly moved the sufferer to a more natural position, then bent over him in silence for a few minutes, hands and eyes busy. Owen Price stood ready to lend a hand, but when he offered help, Kendrick silently waved him aside.

Presently he drew back, drawing a full breath, his face pale and bedewed with sweat.

"I thought so at first, and now I *know* it! I'd give a good deal to know just how the poor fellow got it!" he muttered, brushing an unsteady hand across his brow.

"Got what? His oh-be-joyful?"

"No. The Devil-weed!"

"Corn or rye? Which is it your delightful Missouri Mossbacks extract their genial mountain dew from, Robin?"

Kendrick gave a start, staring into the face of his chum, at first failing to catch his meaning. But as that skeptical smile grew plainer, he rose to his feet, shivering a bit as he cast a glance backward at that face, now turning whiter, more corpse-like than ever.

"The poor fellow is not drunk, Owen, but drugged—poisoned!"

"Really?"

"I wish I was less sure of it—poor Mose!" with an uneasy sigh as he glanced again at the unconscious man.

"Not fatally? Is there nothing we can do for him?"

Kendrick shook his head.

"I believe there is an antidote, but I don't know *what* it is, or where to look for it. We can do nothing but wait until Moses rouses up, then—perhaps—we can make *him* tell us what to give him."

Owen Price had lost his air of skepticism, and a sad, wistful look came into his cynical countenance as he gazed upon that magnificent wreck, lying so helpless in the power of a noxious drug.

"Only wait? It looks like abetting a murder," he muttered, turning away his gaze with a little shiver. "Bleeding? Bathing? Friction?"

Kendrick once more shook his head in negation.

"Nothing but wait, unless I'm all wrong in my guess. He may rouse up at any moment,

wild and crazy, as you saw him a bit ago. Or—he may like that for hours—days, even!”

“Or—only open his eyes in another and better world than this!” muttered Price, sadly.

“Hardly so bad as that,” said Kendrick, forcing a smile as he put out a hand and led his chum around to the other side of the fire, on the coals of which he then cast a few dry sticks.

Neither spoke again for some little time, their eyes irresistibly drawn toward that motionless figure despite their evident efforts to keep them away.

The blaze sprung up merrily, lighting up their faces and forms, bringing out their strongly contrasting features with distinctness.

They were friends, tried and true, all the fonder of each other, perhaps, because they formed such a complete contrast in all save honor and manhood.

Owen Price was the elder, by some half-dozen years. He was but a trifle over five feet in height, of wiry build, all nerve and sinew, weighing barely one hundred pounds. His face was thin and narrow, not ugly, yet far from being handsome.

His close-cropped hair was almost as white as lint, covering his skull like the down on a young goslin. His eyebrows were of the same color, but shaggy and very thick, hanging over his small, deep-set, pinkish gray eyes like a heavy thatch, while his mustaches, starting straight out and curving downward until the hair-tips touched his chin, completely masked the lower part of his face.

His wiry little figure was covered by a shooting-suit of mouse-colored corduroy; helmet, coat, vest, trousers and leggings, the latter strapped over a pair of English walking-shoes.

Robin Kendrick, as we have said, was dressed much the same, and armed after the same fashion; with brace of revolvers, knife and Winchester rifle; but there the resemblance ceased.

He was graceful, yet powerfully built, standing a couple of inches below the six feet standard, and weighing some twelve stone. He was twenty-five years of age, and as handsome a young fellow as one would find in a day's search. His hair was brown, slightly curling, his neatly trimmed mustaches being a shade lighter. His eyes, large, frank, honest, resolute, were hazel.

Just now those eyes were troubled, roving from the motionless form of Moses Hunter to the gloomy woods surrounding them, then back again.

“Poisoned! The Devil-weed, sure!” he muttered, uneasily. “But, where did he get it? And how?”

He was not conscious of speaking aloud, but the keen ears of Owen Price caught the muttered words, and with a short laugh he answered:

“Not knowing, can't say. Might be able to give a guess, though, if I knew a little more about your real reasons for taking this outlandish trip into the wilds of Missouri!”

There was a trace of impatience in his words, very unusual with Owen Price, who was content, as a rule, to accept matters as they came.

Knowing him so well, Kendrick knew that a perfectly plain answer must be given if peace was to reign between them; but before he could fairly collect his scattered wits sufficiently to make reply, there came the light echo of a swift footfall, and another figure sprung into the little circle of firelight.

“A lady!” ejaculated Kendrick, instinctively jerking off his hat.

“An angel!” supplemented Price, with a profound bow, his little eyes glowing with mingled surprise and admiration.

The marvel would have been had they received that visitation without amazement, for the new-comer was a young woman, really beautiful in face and figure, none the less so because her simple attire of cheap material was disordered by hasty progress through the woods and darkness, while her red lips were parted by quick breathing, her cheeks richly flushed, her purple-blue eyes sparkling brightly with poorly masked excitement, and her golden-brown hair straying partly from its fastenings as a twig enviously grasped at it.

“Quick!” she panted, one hand quivering toward the startled men as she cast an apprehensive look over her shoulder into the blackness from which she had just emerged. “You must go—go at once!”

“If you say so, ma'am,” bowed Price. “But whither? And why?”

“They'll kill you if they find you here! Kill you like—Oh!”

She started, and shrunk back with a gasp as she caught sight of Mossback Mose lying on the ground.

“He will not harm you—poor fellow!” sighed Kendrick, following her eyes with his own. “He is not dead, but—”

“I know: it was that which brought me. You must go—at once! Go! Leave other hounds to do your cruel work, and—”

“May I ask what work you think we have come here to perform?”

“Oh, why waste time in talk?” with a passionate gesture as she again glanced backward, shrinking as though she expected a shot or a blow from the bushes through which she had so hastily forced her way. “Why don't you go

while you can? Why linger until—Go! I would not have your blood shed, even though you are hunting down innocent men whose only crime lies in trying to live by hard labor!”

“How can we flee, without knowing what we are to flee from?”

“You do know—you must know! You took your life in your hands when you came here to spy, but—”

“What?” a little sharply interposed Kendrick, a suspicion of the truth flashing across his brain.

“You are revenue spies—”

“Asking your pardon, madam, but we are not revenue spies!”

Those big blue eyes swiftly sought his face, looking at him keenly, searchingly, for a few moments. Then, with a repetition of that hurried gesture, the young woman spoke again:

“No matter! You are suspected of being Secret Service spies, and as such you are already doomed to—You must flee, at once, or it will be forever too late!”

Her voice choked and she left that dread sentence incomplete. But none who heard her could for an instant doubt her perfect truth as she repeated, that warning. There was danger brewing, and danger of the deadliest sort, too!

“We are not in the revenue service at all, and—”

“There is no time to argue, I tell you, sir!” with an impatient stamp of her little foot. “If you are found here, death will surely be your portion! You must flee—must leave the Ozarks at once!”

“But, how can we?” pointing his meaning by a glance toward Moses.

“Mossback Mose? He is safe enough. He is one of this country, and one of those who are hunting for you this very minute!”

“And a Judas, selling his masters?” sneered Price.

“No! His only fault lies in trusting smooth-tongued strangers too far!” was the swift retort, as her bright eyes flashed upon his thin, cynical countenance. “He will be safe with those who are coming. But you—flee without further delay if you hope to ever again look upon the faces of those who are near and dear to you!”

CHAPTER III.

WAITING FOR CALLERS.

OWEN PRICE shrugged his shoulders, with a half-smile, and the young woman was turning away like one whose errand had been performed, when Robin Kendrick gently interposed.

“We owe you a thousand thanks, Miss—Miss—”

He hesitated for a name, but if his appealing look was noticed, it was not answered. She made an impatient gesture as she rapidly added:

“Go now! don't stop for anything, as you are in love with life! The loss of five minutes may make all the difference between life and—Go, I beg of you, gentlemen!”

It was an abrupt change, from almost command to beseeching, but the very contrast only proved her intense earnestness. The peril must indeed be great to give birth to such strong agitation.

So Robin Kendrick felt, but Owen Price looked more than ever the skeptic, his mustache bristling, his pinkish gray eyes glittering under their shaggy brows, his little pug nose still further increasing his likeness to a Scotch terrier.

“Like the wicked flea, eh? But suppose we should happen to bump right up against the—did you say men, or monkeys, ma'am?”

With a sweep of his strong right arm Kendrick sent the scoffer back a pace, speaking rapidly and earnestly to their strange caller:

“We do thank you—we are grateful, ma'am; but, at the same time I must assure you that we are not revenue spies. We are simply young fellows out from St. Louis on a hunt, meaning no harm to anybody or—”

“I wish I could—I do believe you, sir!” impulsively cried the young woman, as if unconsciously reaching out a little brown hand in answer to his appealing gesture, seeming hardly conscious of the warmth with which his fingers closed over it the next moment. “But go—go at once, else 'twill be forever too late! Even now they may be within sight or hearing! Even now—go, I beg of you!”

“Tell me whom you mean, please?”

“Men who would shoot—let me go, sir!” flushing hotly in the fire-glow, as though she for the first time realized how closely her hand was held captive.

With a swift motion Kendrick lifted the hand to his lips, barely brushing it with his mustache, then drawing back a bit as he permitted the fingers to go free.

“One word more, dear lady,” he said, quickly, as she turned to go as she had come. “We are men, and able to take care of ourselves, but you: how will it be with you?”

“I will be punished as a traitor by my own kindred, but—”

“Yet you bid us flee and leave you to suffer?”

“If I was found here, I meant to say. Go—make your way to the North, over the range. Go at once, and never venture back into these parts as you love life!”

She flung the last words back over a shoulder

as she sprung out of the fire-light and through the bushes, avoiding the hand which Robin Kendrick instinctively flung forward, leaving only a brief flutter of golden-brown hair as the bushes caught at it in her flight. Then—the strange visitor was gone!

“As you were, old boy!” sharply ejaculated Owen Price, bringing his chum to a halt as he instinctively started after the young woman. “Do you always have to run your deers down in Missouri?”

Kendrick flushed hotly, then turned paler than usual, a troubled look coming into his eyes as they turned upon Mossback Mose, who had lain motionless through all this, then met that cynical, half-contemptuous gaze.

“You're right—I didn't stop to think how—Owen, we've got to skin out o' this in a holy hurry!” his tones and manner swiftly changing.

He now looked his usual self, quick to decide and prompt to act. All indecision was gone as he strode over to where their rifles stood against a tree, under whose spreading boughs their wild-wood couches had been formed. But Owen Price stood still, shrugging his narrow shoulders and tugging at his mustache as he drawled:

“Do you always catch it so easy, partner?”

“You mean—”

“That what seemed very charming in a beautiful young lady, looks mightily like a case of skeer in a healthy young buck like yourself, Robin! In other words: what are we to run from?”

“From lead, if not from a couple of noosed ropes!”

“Oh, fan me with a knitting-needle! You, too?”

“Don't be a fool, man!” sharply retorted Kendrick, turning his head and bending an ear as a faint sound greeted his hearing. “A man might as well be in his coffin as to be branded with that mark, in these parts! Only a horse-thief is hated more bitterly than a revenue spy—or punished as promptly!”

“A mighty neat trick, but all the same a trick!” grimly nodded Price, with a glance toward Mossback Mose. “I know I'm new to your wild and woolly Western games, old fellow, but not quite so green as to swallow everything that's offered. Not without stopping to taste, at all events.”

Kendrick did not interrupt him, for he was listening intently, trying to single a more dangerous sound from the low murmuring of the brewing storm. He failed in this, but his belief of coming danger was stronger than ever if possible, as he turned and grasped his chum by an arm, quickly saying:

“It may be a trick, as you say, Owen, but we'd be worse than fools to trust wholly to that chance. We've got to pull out—”

“Good-by, old boy. Send me word how you like the country over the range, when you get there, won't you?” drawled Price, shaking the hand that touched him with mock gravity.

“Come—as a favor, Owen. At least out of this light. Give me a show to dodge a bullet, even if you don't care for one yourself.”

Kendrick had grown cool enough to bring his keen wits into play, dropping argument for craft, and though Price laughed a bit at that artful dodge, he yielded, taking his rifle and following the lead of his friend out of the fire-glow.

Robin passed rapidly up the bill, picking his way as by instinct through the bushes and thick-lying rocks, pausing finally on a little rock-ledge high above the camp-ground, where they could look down upon all that might take place thereabouts, while themselves being hidden from observation.

“Plays it mighty well, don't he?” muttered Price, looking down at the silent figure of their guide.

“Poor fellow!” with a long breath of regret. “I trust he'll pull through all right. I'd hate to think—”

“Don't run the risk, old boy. It takes brains to think without danger of—”

“Will you never be reasonable, Owen Price? I tell you, man, we're over a powder-magazine, with the match lit and growing mighty short! That girl was not lying, any more than poor Mose is playing a trick on us. We're suspected of being here to smell illicit stills, and that means death without judge or jury, if caught!”

“Honest?”

“Is it a fit subject for jesting, man alive? Yes! honest! I was a fool not to have foreseen and guarded against such an ugly mistake!”

“My mother taught me 'twas impolite to contradict another, so fool goes, if you really think the title fits. But—if you think there is such danger, why not avert it by coming out flat-footed and fully explaining just why we are here?”

Kendrick forced a laugh; low and guarded, but hardly mirthful.

To whom? And, even supposing the chance was offered, that might make things no better mighty fast. Sort of out of the fryingpan into the fire, don't you see?”

“I don't exactly see, but I hear—Good-evening, gentlemen!” murmured Owen Price, giving a crisp little nod down toward the camp.

There was only a brief crackling among the

bushes surrounding two sides of the camping ground, then a number of rough-clad, thoroughly armed men sprung out into the natural clearing, uttering gruff cries of angry disappointment as they looked in vain for their anticipated victims.

"For your life, not a word, Owen!" hissed Kendrick, almost savagely gripping the arm of his chum. "We're gone, if they smoke us out!"

"Well, we'll make it mighty interesting for them, from here; but if you really think—"

Owen left the sentence incomplete. Even his skeptical nature was not proof against the scene then taking place below them.

The first man to spring into the firelight paused to glare about him, giving a short, sharp cry as he noticed the prostrate figure of the guide. He recoiled momentarily, but as others broke through the bushes he seemed to gain courage, for he sprung to the side of the unconscious man and—

"Look! the merciless demon!" gasped Kendrick, lifting his rifle as though for a snap-shot as he caught sight of a bared blade in the right hand of the stranger. "He means to murder—"

The same fear seemed to strike at least one other, for a tall, gaunt figure sprung forward, gripping the kneeling man by the shoulder and hurling him backward, harshly crying:

"None o' that, Perry Sparks! No stickin' a good lad like Mose!"

The weapon flashed as it spun through the air, falling at the edge of the fire, but its owner hastily blurted out:

"I didn't—I was just—I reckoned those devils had killed the poor fellow!"

"Dollars to cents you're lyin', mister man!" breathed Owen Price, at length appearing to realize the nature of the scene. "You meant to stick Moses, then lay the blame on our heads!"

Garl Orton, the bony giant who had acted so promptly, paid no further attention to the man whom he called Perry Sparks, but bent over the senseless guide, searching with practiced fingers for a wound sufficient to account for that strange inertness.

There were a round dozen of armed men in all: rough, tough fellows who would prove awkward customers in a fight after their own style, but who now seemed at a loss what step to take next, seeing that their expected game had vanished.

Perry Sparks seemed a notch or two higher in intellect, and as he regained his feet, he cried out, fiercely:

"They've fled—butchered poor Mossback, and skinned out! Scatter and look for sign! They mustn't get away now! Poor Mose must have been drunk enough to let drop something to rouse their suspicions, and so they killed him and—"

"Stiddy, Perry Sparks!" grimly interrupted Garl Orton, turning his head to glance over a shoulder. "Mossback ain't so fur gone as that. He's slewed, not slaughtered!"

"Drunk or dead, we've got others to think of now. You'd ought to know that, Garl Orton!" was the angry retort.

"Waal, I don't know so mighty much that they ain't more yit to larn, young feller," nodded the gaunt giant with a short chuckle. "An' ef I ain't 'way off my nut, they's a bit o' pesky cur'us knowledge hammerin' at my noggin' right this blessed minnit—so they be, now!"

"Scatter and search, I tell ye!" almost howled Perry Sparks, who seemed the most eager of all to secure their prey before it could fairly give them the slip, setting the example himself by catching up a glowing brand and fanning it to a bright blaze by swinging it swiftly around his head. "No time to waste, men! Don't you see there's a mighty storm coming?"

One of the men—a burly, swarthy-faced fellow—sprung toward the bushes through which the young woman had fled, a few minutes before, and plucked an object from a dead branch, turning toward the fire with it in his grimy paw, coming into collision with Garl Orton who had sprung to his feet with sudden energy, adding his voice to that of Perry Sparks:

"Ye're mighty right, lad! Storm comin'! Ef we don't find an' foller tha'r trail right piert, we'll never ketch the p'izen spies!"

CHAPTER IV.

A HARD ROAD TO TRAVEL.

ALL this took place inside of a very few minutes, but that space of time was long enough for our friends to fully realize the nature of their peril, though each one gave it expression according to his own particular disposition.

Robin Kendrick was brave enough, and could be even reckless when circumstances fully justified such action; but he knew that present discovery meant either meek surrender or hopeless fighting against overwhelming odds, where naught but death could be won by killing.

"Come! we've got to travel, Owen, unless we want a red picnic on our hands!" he guardedly muttered, rising to his feet and casting a glance around their present position.

There was little to be seen, save in the one direction, where the campfire imperfectly lit up the surroundings.

Although the moon was near its full, not a ray of light came from overhead. Storm-clouds

were rolling and tumbling in wild profusion, only visible because the edges were a shade or two lighter than the centers. And though not a breath of air fanned the cheeks of the two chums, there was a strange, uneasy moaning sound to be distinguished, as though the storm had already broken, miles and leagues away.

Their camp had been pitched on a level spot, yet the hill rose so abruptly back of it, that the two men now stood more than a hundred feet above the level of their enemies, though hardly thrice that distance from them by an air-line.

All around grew scrubby bushes, with ragged rocks in great profusion, and here and there a large tree, stray sentinels, as it were, to the army of timber below.

Under the most favorable circumstances, travel along such ground would be toilsome enough, but though the darkness hid the worst from their eyes, both Kendrick and Price knew from past observation what a hard road they would have to travel over to flee from that spot.

This partly accounted for the words of Owen Price, but he was pugnacious by nature, always more ready to fight than to flee, never pausing to count the odds before accepting a contract of that class.

"It makes me tired to even think of running, Rob, old boy," he drawled, hitching the pistols a little further to the front.

"To even think of fighting that gang would be worse."

"Well, I don't just see it. I hate a row as bad as anybody can, but if the other side hits out first, I'm just man enough to answer back as best I know how. And—just look on, if you prefer, old boy; I can tumble over every last man of 'em before they can climb up here!"

"Hold! are you crazy, man?" hissed Kendrick, gripping the pigmy's arm sharply. "Draw a drop of blood and salt won't save us!"

"Killing don't last long, while you propose a living death. Ugh!" with a little shiver as he tried to pierce the gloom lying back and above them. "My poor shins! Leggings won't save 'em, nor wisdom—"

"You need common sense more than ought else, Owen Price!" almost angrily muttered Kendrick, pulling the pugnacious pigmy away through the bushes. "If not for your own life, then for my sake—come on!"

By this time more than half of the gang below had procured rude torches and were quartering the camp-ground like human hounds, looking for something to show them which direction their game had taken in flight. Owen Price must have known what a foolish risk he was tempting by lingering another moment in such dangerous company, yet he yielded with positive reluctance to that vigorous grip.

"Only for you, mind, Robin Kendrick," he grumbled, surlily. "I'll lick you for making me play coward, when there's light enough to see just where to hunt out your blessed eyes. I just will, now!"

"All right. I'll kneel down so you can reach them without spraining your toes. Only, come along, like a good fellow."

"Pity you can't act as well as you can talk, big baby," shifted the pigmy, but yielding with less resistance than his chum had dared hope for. "If I had a man one-half my own size to back me up, I'd make just one mouthful of yonder—aw—rabble!"

By this time they had fairly lost sight of the enemy, though only a few rods of space had been gained, thanks to the surrounding cover. And, contrary to the majority of boasting men, Owen Price grew more placable when fairly out of sight of the ones to fight with.

Anything like speedy flight was out of the question over such ground, even if there had been no need of silence. Eyesight availed them but little, during the first few minutes of retreat, and they had to make their way by the sense of feeling alone.

Yet the very obstacles which detained them, likewise served to baffle the men searching for their trail, aided though these were by blazing torches. The ground was barren, rocky, dry almost as stone even where a few yards of earth matter lay in their course. And those very torches showed our friends which way to direct their flight the best to baffle pursuit, until a ridge was crossed and they were finally lost sight of entirely.

This took time, of course, and before a mile was covered, the fugitives began to see more clearly, the edges of the clouds above gaining a wild, lurid glow, indistinctly lighting up the ground below.

Presently the rain-drops began to patter down, few and far apart at first, but so large that each one could be heard as it struck rock or leaf. And that strange, weird moaning sound grew plainer and more distinct, causing Owen Price to cast an apprehensive glance upward as he paused to catch breath after an unusually difficult bit of work.

"Look here, Rob Kendrick," he declared, sourly. "Enough is enough, and too much is a plenty! How much longer do you intend keeping this up? Until we reach and shin up the North Pole itself?"

"Tough, isn't it?" with an invisible smile. "But enough sight better than hanging by the

neck or being filled full of lead, don't you reckon?"

"No, I don't!" with a snarl. "That's short and sweet, but *this* is long drawn out and mighty bitter. Go ahead if you feel like it, but as for me—"

A tremendous clap of thunder drowned his speech, accompanying rather than following a blinding glare of lightning. The bolt seemed to fall all around them, and for a single breath neither man stirred, half-stunned by the shock.

Yet in that single instant of glittering glare Robin Kendrick had a picture imprinted on his retina which decided his further action.

"All right, Owen," he said, presently, as the rain-drops came faster and closer together. "It's going to rain hard enough to wash away all the trail we've left, and those fellows'll not be able to trouble us before day dawns, at least. We'll hunt cover—"

"What's cover, without food or—well, drink don't count! all we need to do is lay back our lips and let it pour in!"

"I've got grub enough: stuck a bundle in my pocket while you were snorting and prancing around on your high-horse," laughed Kendrick, feeling for the hand of his chum as he added: "Come: I saw a ledge of rocks over yonder, by that flash. Dollars to cents we'll find cover as snug as the roof of a palace! All it wants is feeling for it."

Still grumbling, Price followed his lead, and just as the storm broke in good earnest, they reached a sheltered nook under an overhanging rock—the exact nature of which, however, they did not pause to ascertain just then.

The rain was falling in sheets, now, but the fugitives were perfectly sheltered for the time being. The rock hung over their heads, and though there was no wind close to the earth, the rain fell slanting from the north, thus leaving their refuge uninvaded.

"Pretty bare accommodations, but it might be worse, Owen. If I didn't fear to wholly disgust you with our new quarters, I'd light up the old bull's-eye for a more thorough inspection."

"I wouldn't mind a bit more light, that's a fact," grimly said the pigmy, in his deepest tones. "But not through a lantern. Light on this night's adventure, for instance. And a little enlightenment as to just what fool's errand brought you into this benighted region where all maids are mysteries, and all men midnight assassins or crazy drunks."

"Hunting, what else?" answered Kendrick, but with a curious hesitation in his voice that could not escape those shrewd ears.

"Hunting, yes; but hunting *what*?"

"If I should answer dear-hunting?"

"I'd say chestnuts, so refrain. Come, old boy, out with it. I'm just feeling miserable enough to play flea until I make you scratch out the whole truth, will ye, nill ye. And you've known Owen Price long enough to realize just what that means, Robin Kendrick."

"To my sorrow—yes!" with a counterfeit sigh. "All right—here goes: I'm treasure-hunting!"

"Good land o' liberty!" gasped Price, in mock horror. "A case of Captain Kidd on the brain? Which is partly figurative, you understand," in basty amendment. "I never believed you *had* a brain, and now I'm more than ever settled on that point. Treasure-hunting! Here! In this age! Great Scott and little—Shut the door, confound ye!"

With a sudden howl and roar the wind swooped down upon the hill, shifting to the south-west and driving the rain in sheets under the leaning rock which had until then given them perfect shelter.

In vain they shifted their position, crowding as far back against the sloping rock as possible. The wind sought out every inch of the retreat, bringing clouds of fine but heavy rain on its wings. And though their garments were admirably calculated to protect them from dampness, even the best of imported corduroy could not be expected to long withstand such a shower-bath as this.

"There's loose stones enough; pile up a wall and play it keeps out the damp," cried Kendrick with forced cheeriness, having to lift his voice to a high pitch in order to make himself heard above the roar of the wind and falling waters.

This really seemed about their wisest course to follow, since it was entirely out of the question to even think of going forth in quest of a better covert. Five minutes full exposure to that storm would drench them to the skin.

Kendrick set the example, and Owen promptly followed it, grasping and turning over a rock of such size that spoke wonders for the muscular powers packed into that slight frame of his. But that was all he did in that line, giving a sharp ejaculation of wonder and growing hope an instant later.

"Look out, old boy! The bottom's falling out of the mountain, or I've—put my foot into it, anyway!"

"What do you mean, man?" cried Kendrick, in startled tones.

"Mean? Just look, once!" a little proudly, as he struck a match, and covering the blaze with

his curved palms, threw the light into a dark hole near the base of the rock, amply large enough for a human being to crawl into.

"Look out for snakes!" cried Kendrick warningly.

"Bless the snakes! It's the wet I'm thinking about!" recklessly thrusting his feet into the hole by the dying light of the match. "It is all right, old fellow, and room enough even for your bigness, too!"

The wind howled more furiously, driving the rain before it like a waterfall, and Kendrick paused no longer, hastily slipping through the hole, guided by the sense of feeling alone. Then, as he found himself in a dry, open space with ample room to move about, he gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction.

"Better born lucky than wise, Owen, and you—Hark!"

Although the sounds of the storm ought to have been deadened in a degree by their change of position, such was not the case. Instead, the roar suddenly grew in volume, actually seeming to shake the very hill itself, and instead of entering at the hole, as it had an instant before, the air seemed sucked outward with a force that nearly threw the two men flat on their faces.

Then—the awful howling of a hurricane rendered the night hideous. Trees crashed down the hill, bringing great rocks with them, and only blind instinct led the fugitives to crawl away from the hole.

None too soon. For, with a frightful crash the huge mass of rock toppled over, covering the hole and shaking the mountain itself, stunning the refugees until they lay without sense or motion!

CHAPTER V. A GIANT LAID LOW.

ALTHOUGH they seemed savagely chagrined at the unexpected disappearance of their coveted game, those rough-looking fellows lent but a half-hearted compliance when Perry Sparks fanned his brand to a blaze and cried for them to follow suit and hunt for the trail left by the revenue spies. Yet, when Garl Orton, the gaunt old fellow who had been so prompt to act on behalf of the senseless guide, virtually called out the same order, it was as though a secret spring had been released, setting each and every man in swift motion.

The camp-fire was robbed of its brands by those nearest, and while these men fanned the glowing coals into a blaze, their less prompt comrades made haste to pick suitable material for torches from the pile of wood collected hard by.

As Garl Orton turned away from the senseless guide, he came into abrupt contact with a burly, swarthy-faced fellow, on whose arm his left hand closed like a vise as he gave his followers that sharp command.

"Stiddy, Dick Branch!" he added, in a whisper, as the man instinctively recoiled and sought to free his arm. "Button your lip—an' wait fer me!"

"I'll wait fast enough, Orton, but what—"

"Spread out, lads, an' mind ye don't spyle the sign!" cried the gaunt chief, his only answer to Dick Branch being a further contraction of his bony fingers that rendered escape utterly out of the question. "Give the old yelp when ye hit it off, an' I'll be with ye in a jiff. Thar's somethin' too mighty funny 'bout pore Mose—"

Either because no one appeared to be listening to his words, or, it might have been, because he was not yet ready to put his suspicions into plain speech, Garl Orton broke off at that point, turning swiftly in time to see what Dick Branch was staring at so viciously.

A bit of bright blue ribbon, which his keen eye had caught sight of hanging on a twig of the bushes through which the young woman had forced her way only a few brief minutes before the armed men put in an appearance. Beyond a doubt the loose ends had been caught by the twig as its fair owner fled, and in her agitation she had never noticed the loss, which, thanks to those jealous eyes, bade fair to prove a serious one.

"Ye needn't try to hide—what is it, Dick Branch?" harshly demanded Orton, lowering his voice so that only those ears might catch it.

"You'd ought to know, fer I reckon your money paid fer it!" half-sulkily, half-triumphantly growled the younger man, holding the article where the red light of the camp-fire fell squarely across it. "A bit o' blue ribbon, jest sech as—"

"Shet!" growled the gaunt giant, his gaze shifting from ribbon to face, his gray eyes glowing like balls of fire.

"All the same, I've see'd the like o' this afore, An' no longer ago then this very sundown too!"

"Ef ye think to brag o' yer stealin', Dick Branch—"

"Ef it's stealin' to find what 'nother critter lost, then—"

"You hain't found nothin', I tell ye, boy!"

"Then I'm a liar—an' I'm spittin' gospel, all the same, Garl Orton!" doggedly persisted the young fellow, forgetting all prudence in his mad jealousy, shaking the knot of ribbon before those

glittering gray eyes. "You kin play it ain't so, all you like; I'm takin' oath I see this very bit o' blue hangin' to the yaller ha'r of Ruth—"

"Will you shet trap?" almost savagely grated Orton, the tips of his fingers brushing sharply across those bearded lips with nearly force enough to constitute a blow. "Dast to lug the name o' my gal into this boggle, an' I'll break your fool' back—like this!"

The smoking branch in his hands snapped asunder, casting out a little shower of sparks.

Dick Branch recoiled a pace or two. Garl Orton cast aside the fragments of his torch, then turned again to where Mossback Mose was lying in deathlike unconsciousness of all that was transpiring at or about the camp-ground he had chosen for his employers.

Garl Orton seemed to cast aside his anger with the sticks, for not a trace remained in his face as he knelt by the side of the guide. It was not a face to betray much emotion, at the best, but just now it seemed cold and hard as a mask of stone.

It seemed curiosity rather than pity or sympathy that led him to so closely examine the insensible guide: to note his slow, labored breathing, to peer into his half-exposed eyeballs, to pass a hand slowly over that bald head, to stoop lower until his thin, quivering nostrils almost touched that froth-streaked beard.

Dick Branch stood watching the giant moonshiner, his brown fingers closed over that tell-tale bit of blue ribbon. The hot jealousy still flamed in his eyes, but mingling with it now might have been noted a far different light: something not far akin to fear.

He was not a bad-looking fellow, taken all-in-all, and being judged according to his class and surroundings, this Richard Branch.

In age he could not have been far from thirty: under rather than over that figure. He was rather too heavy in build for his figure to be called fine or graceful, but he was strong as an ox and active enough to hold his own with any ordinary antagonist, provided his heart was a fit match for his muscle.

His head was something too small for his body, round and bullet-shaped, covered with thick brown hair, only his eyes, nose and a narrow strip of forehead being left open to view. Such of his skin as was exposed to sight was of a dull, swarthy hue, hardly different from his rusty brown beard.

His garb was similar to that of Garl Orton, and differing but little from that worn by the rest of the party: coarse, substantial, made for comfort and use rather than neatness or good looks.

A belt of webbing was girted about his middle, covered with cartridge-filled loops of oiled leather, and supporting a brace of heavy revolvers and a sheath-knife, while his left hand gripped the barrel of a Winchester repeating rifle.

"Taken all-in-all, a man whom most men would have hesitated to pick out for an easy victim in a deadly encounter. And, after a coarse, brutal fashion, Dick Branch was bold enough in the face of peril. Yet he shrunk visibly now as Garl Orton reared his six-feet-four-inches of bone and muscle, turning toward him with a grim smile twitching his sandy beard and wrinkling the corners of his keen gray eyes.

Without a word Orton gripped the fellow by an arm, leading him over to where Mossback Mose lay motionless. Pointing with a bony finger, he muttered, grimly:

"Look at the boy, Dick Branch. He ain't dead. He ain't drunk, though he's bin drinkin'. Look at the two eyes o' him. Look at the way his nose is pinched in at the end. Look at the foam streakin' his baird. Stoop down an' sniff of it—ef ye ain't afeard to crook the knees o' ye!"

"What'd I be skeered at?" growled the younger man, trying to meet those glittering eyes, but forced to lower his own, while a sickly pallor crept over his swarthy face.

"Nuther dead nor drunk: then what? Devil-weed! Jest that—no less! An' who doped his bottle, Dick Branch?"

"How'n thunder d'ye s'pose I know?"

"Waal, I know," drawing erect, speaking more naturally, yet still in guarded tones, too low to attract attention from the fellows who were still at no great distance searching for the trail left by the fugitives. "Fork over that bit o' blue ribbon, Dick Branch!"

"But—durn it all—"

"Gi' me that ribbon, I say!" his eyes ablaze, his voice growing almost vicious as he took forcible possession, thrusting the tell-tale bit of evidence into his bosom as he added, in lighter tones: "Now shet your trap an' play you hed a weenty grain o' sense left into ye, Dick Branch. Jest dast to even hint at sech a thing as is b'ilin up in your mind, an' I'll tell what I know: I'll set the best lad in all the Ozarks onto the trail o' the dirty whelp as doped his bottle with Devil-weed this day!"

"I never done—"

But Garl Orton had said his say, and had already turned away to call on two of the torch-bearers by name. They promptly obeyed the summons, and with like obedience fell to work constructing a litter at his further command.

"Thar's plenty fer them two p'izen critters 'bout us," he said, in explanation, while busy-ing himself with the rest. "Thar's a mighty storm brewin' up yen' way," with a fleeting glance at the clouds above the hills. "An' Mossback Mose is too good a boy to be left out in sech a downfall, 'thout no one to help him pull through."

"What ye reckon's the matter o' him, Uncle Garl?" ventured one of the mountaineers, with a half-uneasy glance toward the silent guide.

"Devil-weed—wuss luck!"

"Good Lawd! D'ye reckon them cussed spies—"

"Ef your han's was nigh ekil to your clapper, boy, we'd hev all ready afore we begun," gruffly growled the giant. "Do mo' an' say less. We want to git Mose whar I kin doctor him, an' a outside soakin' ain't gwine to help his fix none—to brag off!"

Dick Branch had held back at first, showing an inclination to join the trail-hunters in preference to lingering at camp, but though Garl Orton had not spoken to him since concluding that significant warning, a meaning look from those keen gray eyes had kept the burly rascal near at hand.

A litter good enough to serve their purpose was not hard to contrive for such men. Keen knives quickly hacked down a couple of stout saplings, across which were placed two shorter bars: a pair of blankets—left behind by the fugitives—were knotted at the corners to these, and then Garl Orton and one of the men whom he had called back from the hunt, lifted the insensible guide upon the litter.

"Which way, Orton? It's nighest to the cave, an'—"

"Roughest, too, a heap. Then the doctorin' stuff is at the cabin. An' my ole woman knows best how to stew it up. So—stiddy! Now!"

With his back to the litter, so that he could guide while supporting his portion of the lifeless burden, Garl Orton picked up one end of the rude conveyance, pushing through the fringe of bushes and entering the darkness, all the more intense now the storm-clouds were hanging so low.

As the light of the camp-fire was lost to view, he curtly bade Dick Branch and the other mountaineer keep near, ready to take their share of the burden, for with so much depending on haste, there would be no time wasted in catching breath.

Only one perfectly familiar with the lay of the ground could have acted as guide amid such utter darkness as reigned beneath those trees, and without an almost marvelous instinct even such a guide must have frequently blundered into difficulties awkward to overcome with such a heavy burden. But, Orton possessed those gifts, and their progress was far more rapid than seemed possible.

But their destination was still far away when the rain-drops first began to patter through the leaves above their heads; and all their haste, Orton causing his men to frequently relieve each other at the handles, though showing no signs of fatigue himself, proved unequal to the task of reaching snug shelter before the storm fairly burst.

Luckily for them their course had led them at right angles with the path of the coming hurricane, and that this was comparatively narrow—covering only a few hundred yards in width, though many miles in length—for, though they were only struck by the skirt of the tornado, that was terrific enough in its results.

The warning was too brief for them to hunt securer cover, and all they could do was to cower down and cling to bush or sapling, while the air was filled with leaves and twigs and broken branches, the sturdy trees swaying and creaking, and threatening to fall in ranks, like their fellows only a short distance away. And, to add to the horrors, Mossback Mose suddenly roused up, leaping from the litter with a wild yell.

"Buzz-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z! Burr-rr-r-o-u-r-k! Who dast to set up a howl while I'm on a swarm? Cl'ar the track, fer I'm a-comin'!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOONSHINER AT HOME.

"FER the love—ketch him!" screamed Garl Orton, staggering to his feet and blown, rather than leaping, upon the crazed giant.

Eddying along on the skirt of the tornado, the wind caught the two giants and twisted them about, flinging them to the ground as though nothing more substantial than a brace of straws.

It was fortunate for both, perhaps, that Mossback Mose fell underneath, the weight of Orton helping to neutralize the tremendous power lent him by that maddening drug. And then he gave the moonshiner all he could manage, even when assisted by the bravest one of his men.

It was a grim, ghastly struggle, intensified by the awful howling of the tempest and the intense blackness with which all was enveloped.

Trees were crashing as the hurricane mowed a clean swath through the forest. The very earth trembled and seemed to rock, the surface rising and falling in waves as of a troubled sea, turn-

ing those sick who clung so desperately to their bushes and listened to that fearful struggle going on so near, yet unseen. They doubtless suffered even more than those engaged in that savage grapple, for they had no time for thought.

All ended almost as swiftly as it had begun.

The hurricane swept on, performing its work of annihilation as by magic, leaving ruin and desolation in its narrow path, its horrible roar dying out in the distance, leaving a hot, breathless silence behind. And at the same instant Mossback Mose—with one last wild buzz, gave over his fierce struggles, collapsing like a wet rag in those strong arms.

"Hyar, ye skulkers!" panted Orton, too thoroughly excited to pick his words. "Scrabble fer the litter, an' help wrop Mose up in the blankets—af' the back-end o' wet comes swoop-in! Lively, now!"

Fortunately the litter had not been carried away by the wind, but was found twisted around the trunk of a tree close at hand; and before that curious but characteristic lull ended, the hapless guide, once more inert as a corpse, which he resembled save in his slow, labored breathing, was snugly bundled up in the blankets and held so that he could not break away again should another fit occur.

Not a breath of air was stirring, nor a drop of rain falling. It was a positive labor to breathe, the mountaineers panting, gasping much as a fish does when out of its native element. It was warm as an oven, yet the atmosphere was so dry that sweating was impossible. Half an hour of such existence would have broken down the stoutest man among them, but past experience warned the Hillers that this oppressive lull would be of brief duration.

Without a sound of warning, a rush of cold air chilled them to the bone, coming as from an iceberg. Then all was still as death for a few moments. Then, with a howl and a wail the reflex winds began to play, causing all to bow and cower before it during the brief space it lasted in its full force. Then came the rain, in heavy gusts at first, but quickly settling down into a steady pour.

Not yet did the mountaineers stir, further than to bow their heads and round their backs to the storm. All was going as past experience warned them, and they knew that the rain would cease before another ten minutes could creep by.

At the first signs of slackening, Orton was up and at work, removing the blankets from about Mossback Mose, replacing them on the supports, then bidding his comrades lend a hand to lift the guide upon the litter once more.

After this not a word was spoken until a considerable opening in the forest was reached, where Orton gave word to lower their burden to the ground for a space.

The storm had passed over, the sky had cleared, moon shining brightly and stars twinkling in myriads overhead. By their light Orton bent over the litter to examine the luckless guide.

"He ain't—ain't croaked, Uncle Orton?" softly ventured the younger mountaineer, addressing his chief by the familiar title given both because of his age and his acknowledged authority, not on account of kinship.

"Not a mite of it, Brack! Didn't ye ever hear tell o' the Devil-weed an' the cur'us way it does its dirty work?"

"I've hearn, but I never see'd, afore. You reckon—"

"I reckon I'm pityin' a sart'in feller ef Mossback Mose ever hits off his trail, a'ter this dirty job! That's what I'm reckonin', sonny, fer one thing. Fer 'nother, I'm reckonin' we'd better pull foot ag'in ef Mose is to git over this dopin'. Ef? He's done got to!" with grim emphasis as his tireless hands once more lifted half that dead weight. "Got to, ye mind? Fer Moses is too mighty good a lad ter go under in sech a nasty, p'izen, sheep-killin' dog fashion as this!"

Brack Johnson said no more. Dick Branch and Tom Haller had not broken the silence at all, the one because he had ample food for thought without seeking for more, the other because of natural taciturnity.

With light to aid them, progress was more rapid, even though the nature of the ground grew more difficult the nearer they came to their destination. True, the forest proper was left behind them, trees growing more and more scattered as they advanced; but now they were among the hills, where rocks lay thickly, and gulches were frequently met with.

An hour of such traveling brought the little party within sight of their journey's end—a comfortable looking cabin nestling high up on the rugged hill, where a broad, level plateau afforded ample living space for such a mountaineer as Garl Orton.

A cheery light was shining through the front window and streaming out through the open front door, telling plainer than words that the return of the owner was expected by his home-folks. And then, just when the litter-bearers began to breast the last steep slope, a trim, graceful figure was outlined against that ruddy glow.

"Comin', Ruth!" cheerily called out Garl Orton, while Dick Branch caught his breath

sharply and hung a little back. "Last spurt, lads! You Dick!"

"I'm hyar, Garl Orton," growled the burly young fellow.

"Spell me the rest o' the way. I'll slope ahead an' hev the ole woman git things ready fer to—"

Having gained his point, and guarded against the man who held such a dangerous secret in his possession skulking out of sight without warning, Garl Orton did not take the trouble to complete his sentence.

He strode swiftly up the slope, hastily muttering to Ruth as he came near the doorway:

"We didn't ketch the pesky critters, but we've brung back Mose Hunter—doped! Whar's mother?"

"Whar she usuly is, 'course. What's wantin', Orton?" asked a tall, faded-looking woman of middle age, making her appearance as her husband crossed the threshold.

"Mose Hunter's ketched a dose o' Devil-weed. The boys is totin' him up the hill. Git your stuff ready quick's ye know how, fer—"

"I know. Do your part an' I'll hold up my eend, Orton," curtly interrupted his wife, turning away to the little kitchen at the rear of the building.

The mountaineer turned back to receive the litter-bearers. Dick Branch abruptly lowered his end at the door, turning away without a word, though he paused at no great distance, plainly awaiting the further pleasure of the moonshiner.

Garl Orton frowned, a troubled light flitting across his face as he noted this action. But he could not waste more time just then. If aught was to be done for Mossback Mose, the less delay the better.

Ruth had fallen back at the approach of the men with their grim burden; her face flushing, then paling, as she caught the fiery glance cast upon her by Dick Branch. And knowing that if her aid was required, call would be made, she passed into a little chamber at the end of the cabin, partly closing the door behind her.

Mossback Mose was taken from the litter and carried into another small chamber directly opposite, where Mrs. Orton superintended his being placed on a low bed, then gave her husband a look which he readily interpreted to Johnson and Haller.

"Ef ye'll jest step outside a bit, lads, an' keep Dick Branch comp'ny. Room's mighty skeerce in hyar, an' Nancy hates to bark her elbows!"

"I'll call ye when I want anythin', Orton," curtly said Nancy, partly closing the door behind them with a deft backward kick as she bent over the senseless guide.

Neither Haller nor Johnson took umbrage at this rather unceremonious dismissal, probably being accustomed to it, and no doubt feeling more at home out of doors than with a roof above their heads.

Garl Orton bore them company to the door, but paused there for a few moments, until seeing the three men smoking their pipes in company. Then he turned to the little chamber to which Ruth had retreated, his gaunt face grave and troubled.

The girl looked up quickly at his entrance, reading his face with true womanly skill, dim though the light was just there. She noted that frown, and remarked the uneasy—or was it angry?—light in his gray eyes.

"Father! you said—I thought you told me—"

"We didn't do no hurt, beca'se the devils was gone afore we got to camp," interrupted the moonshiner, his voice hard but subdued. "Mebbe you kin tell why we didn't find 'em, Ruth?"

"I'm glad—so glad!" with a long breath of relief.

"I wish I knowed how to feel that way, jest now, Ruth, but—how kin I when—I reckon you lost this, gal?" he said, abruptly, drawing the blue ribbon from his breast and holding it toward the girl. "'Pears like I see'd it hitchin' up your ha'r on'y this evenin'. Didn't I?"

Her face flushed hotly, then paled until it was white as snow. Her eyes met his steady gaze, but never flinched as she read the truth written there.

"Yes. It is mine. I lost it this evening."

"An' Dick Branch found it. Whar, do you reckon?"

"Somewhere between here and the camp where you found Moses Hunter, father, no doubt."

"Right at the edge o' that camp! How did it come thar? Ruth, gal, honey!" with a note of bitter pain in his subdued voice. "I never thought to see the day that I'd know one o' my own kin hed turned traitor to her own people! I'd heap sight rather you was—"

"Don't—don't say that, daddy!" sobbed Ruth, clasping his neck with her arms and drawing him down to a seat on the narrow bed by her side.

"But ef it's gospel, honey—Ruth Orton?" checking himself and hardening his voice once more.

"I did it to prevent murder! I did it to save innocent men from receiving a punishment they had done nothing to deserve!"

"Innocent?" echoed Orton, with a dark scowl. "Wolves, ruther! P'izen spies, come 'round smellin' out honest men's secrets, jest honin' to

sell tha'r lives an libe'ties fer a dollar or two o' blood-money! Is them your sort o' innocent men, Ruth Orton?"

"Who says they are revenue spies?"

"Who says they ain't rev'nue spies?"

"They swore as much, and—"

"They swore to a durn, p'izen, up-an'-down lie, then!"

"But even if I had known they were spies, as you declare, I would not regret having sent them off in time to— Oh, father!" with a low, choking sob. "I did it all for ycu! I wanted to save you from—I'd rather lose everything else, just so your hands are kept free from— from bloodshed!"

"You've played wuss then the fool, an' yit you hain't made so sure that I won't find the red paint, gal!" with a short, hard laugh. "They cain't git clean off, 'thout they kin borry wings o' the buzzards: fitten match, anyway—durn 'em, hide an' taller!"

"Why are you so sure they are revenue spies, father?" persisted the maiden. "Would Moses Hunter guide our enemies here?"

"Not ef he knowed it, but he mought 'a' bin fooled into 'em."

"I don't believe it! I'd sooner trust him than that sneak, Perry Sparks. And he's the one who set you on their track, I know!"

CHAPTER VII.

DICK BRANCH PUTS HIS FOOT INTO IT.

"Ef he did—an' I ain't sayin' he did done it, ye mind," slowly spoke Garl Orton, that uneasy look in his gray eyes telling how far his real thoughts were from the man whose name had been so abruptly introduced. "Ef he did done it, 'twasn't nothin' more'n his bounden duty, owin' to his fri'nds an' neebors. Ef he did—you Ruth?"

"Yes, daddy?"

"Ef a man hed dast even hint sech a p'izen thing ag'inst my gal, I'd 'a' rammed that hint down his thrapple, 'long 'ith his teeth!"

"I did it all for you, daddy," murmured Ruth, nestling closer to his side, her little hands petting one of his big, bony paws, her curly head resting lovingly just over his heart. "I knew how 'twould be. I knew that those fellows would hang back and only follow your lead, looking for you to do all, until the danger was over. And so—I just couldn't bear to wait and let it—that happen!"

"You'd ruther sight they'd git off, to come back 'long of a hull gang o' houn's to break up the still an' tote we-uns to the Pen?"

"Even that would be better than bloodshed! But I don't—I can't think it! They declared they were only simple hunters, and Moses would never bring bad men here. You know that, daddy, dear?"

"I know he's nigh about as good as they make 'em, but—how come you to l'arn ar'ythin' 'bout what we 'lowed to do, Ruth?"

"I overheard you talking, down near the still."

"Afore Mossback left?"

"Yes. I saw he was drinking some, but I didn't pay much attention to him, then. I heard something Perry Sparks said, and that turned me back. It set me to thinking. And then—I just had to do it, daddy! I'd have died, thinking! I would have been all alone. Mother wouldn't have understood—or cared! And so—I heard Moses say where the camp was, and I hoped to find it before the rest of you could get there."

"'Twas a resky an' a fool' trick, Ruth Orton!" frowned the giant moonshiner, though it cost him an effort to steel himself against that appealing sob and tender, timid hug. "An' one sech as I never reckoned any o' my kin would ever dream o' playin'. More 'specially since—ef you hearn Mossback Mose say whar the camp was, you must 'a' hearn him say more: must 'a' knowed he didn't trust the p'izen critters him own self!"

"He didn't mean that he reckoned they were spies."

"He said he didn't, but—"

"That was only the back-biting tongue of Perry Sparks, when he knew that Moses was out of sight and hearing. Perry Sparks! A born liar and life-long sneak! You can't lower Moses Hunter so far as to compare the two, father?"

"Ef they wasn't spies, what'd they run off fer?"

"They wanted to stay, but I begged them to go—for your sake, daddy! Begged them, almost with tears in my eyes! And—if they had been the evil wretches you think, father, wouldn't they have held me as a safeguard against harm from you all?"

"Holy creation! ef I'd thought o' sech a thing!" hoarsely ejaculated Garl Orton, his face turning a sickly yellow as his bony hands clinched until their joints cracked audibly.

"You Orton!" came the clear, sharp voice of Mrs. Orton from the chamber in which Mossback Mose had been carried. "I want you!"

"Comin', Nancy! Don't ye go to bed until I kin talk ye some more, Ruth. Comin', I say!"

Garl Orton hastened to obey that summons

with an alacrity which proved he was not an undisputed ruler under that roof, and Ruth was left alone with her thoughts for the time being.

These were not altogether pleasant, though she could not help rejoicing that the two strangers had taken her advice so far as to abandon camp before the arrival of the mountaineers. For, more firmly than ever, she could not believe them the black villains Perry Sparks had painted.

"He knew he lied when he said it!" she said, just above her breath, but with a vigorous nod that sent her gold curls fluttering. "Why did he? Because he hates poor Moses—because of dear mercy!"

Ruth left her little chamber, pausing with anxious eyes on the door beyond which her parents were doing what lay in their power for the foully drugged guide. Only an indistinct marmur came through the barrier. This was one of the intervals which, she had heard, came between those frightful spasms marking the terrible power of that noxious weed.

With a little shiver as she involuntarily summed up the grief and despair which would follow the death of this honest fellow, Ruth Orton turned away, almost unconsciously passing through the open door into the calm, fresh, pure night.

Mud was almost an unknown quantity in that rocky, arid region, and everything seemed fresher, cleaner for the storm, while the moon and stars gave ample light.

"No change fer the wuss, be they, Ruth?" ventured Thomas Haller, a man of middle age, an old and trusted friend of her father. "Nothin' we kin do to help?"

"Nothing—no change, I believe. You'll hear if father should call. I'm—going to the spring, a bit," hurriedly said Ruth, hardly knowing just what words passed her lips as she glanced quickly around without seeing aught of Richard Branch.

So far from wishing to see or meet him just then, she would never have crossed the threshold had she remembered in time that he had formed one of the litter-bearers.

Not that she feared the swart-browed mountaineer, but in that instant the words of her father flashed across her mind; Dick Branch had found her blue ribbon, lost as she fled from the strangers' camp!

She had paid little or no attention to them when spoken, for dread of her father's anger overpowered all else; but now the words flashed back to her mind as she cast a quick look around in expectation of beholding her unwelcome lover.

Lover he was, so far as his own inclinations could make him such, and had been one for years back; back to the time when he was just sprouting a beard, and Ruth was a little girl, wild as a deer and gay as a lark.

Even then Ruth had barely tolerated him, though Dick Branch was fairly welcome to both father and mother. He came of "good old stock," and his father had fallen while fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with Garl Orton under the shadow of the "bonny blue flag" before the "Stars and Bars" were generally adopted as the standard of the Confederacy.

After his first rejection, Dick Branch went away, no one seemed to know whither, only returning less than a year before that night of the tornado. Since his return he had pressed his suit, in and out of season, with a dogged persistence that had quickly turned Ruth's indifference to positive dislike. Now—she felt that she fairly hated the fellow!

She had reached the little spring which supplied the house with water, and that thought was just passing through her busy brain, when its subject rose before her with hand stretched out for the customary mountain greeting.

"Don't run off, Ruth. I ain't nyther p'izen nur a wild wolf, though you do act like I was both—b'iled down!"

"I thought—you'd gone home."

"Or you wouldn't 'a' come out: is that the how of it, Ruth?" with a low, bitter laugh as he pointed her refusal to shake hands by clapping fingers and shaking them himself.

"You said it, not I, Mr. Branch," coldly retorted the maiden, leaning back against the stone curbing, since she could not retreat to the cabin without actually pushing him out of the narrow path.

"But you meant it, all the same."

"Have it in that way, if the thought gives you pleasure, sir."

"You're hard—hard as iron to me, Ruth Orton! Yit you know how crazy-mad I be fer love o' you ever sence—"

"That craziness accounts for your lack of sense, Mr. Branch," with a low, malicious laugh, unable to resist the temptation, giving his words a twist which he certainly did not intend. "Please let me pass. I've neither time nor inclination to listen to crazy men, while—"

"You're doin' your level best to drive me crazy, Ruth Orton!" almost savagely grated Branch, his muscular hand closing upon her arm with an unconscious force that made her flinch with pain.

"I didn't mean—I'm monstrous sorry, Ruthie,

gal," he hastily mumbled, flushing as he realized what he had done.

"You are mean—how poison mean I never dreamed until this very night, when poor Moses Hunter fell a victim to the evil arts of men who are not fit to kiss the dirt his feet treads upon!"

"Ruth—I didn't—what ye mean, gal?" hoarsely stammered the young mountaineer, unconsciously tightening his grip once more.

"How did you manage to put that drug into his bottle, Dick Branch? You're too big a coward to run any chance of his catching you at such a trick, but—how did you drug Moses Hunter?"

"I never tetched his bottle. I never drugged him. I don't know what you're tryin' to git through ye, anyway, Ruth Orton!"

"The foul trick rests between you and Perry Sparks: one as guilty as the other. I know it!" declared Ruth, throwing all prudence to the winds at thought of the hapless sufferer beneath her roof.

"Perry Sparks kin talk fer himself. What he done, or what he never done, I ain't 'temptin' to say. But ef ary other body but you, Ruthie, was to 'cuse me o' dopin' Mose Hunter, or Mose Anybody-else, I'd give him the lie back—with a swaller o' loose teeth to hold it down!"

"So you say: what you'll do, depends on whether Moses lives or—if he should die, Richard Branch!" her voice growing harder, her blue eyes flashing vividly as one little hand rose before his scowling face. "If this black night's work proves his death, the whole world won't be nigh big enough for his vile murderer to hide in!"

"That don't consarn me, Ruth Orton," growled the mountaineer. "To hear an' see ye, a body'd e'ena'most reckon him 'nd you'd come to a match of it—so they would!"

"I might make a far worse choice, and not have far to seek, either, Mr. Branch," with a mocking bow, then tapping his broad breast in a manner to point her next words: "I'm going back to the house. You're blocking the way, if you please, sir."

"Whar's the blue ribbon I see ye have onto your ha'r, this evenin', Ruth?" bluntly demanded Branch, an evil glow leaping into his eyes.

"In my pocket. Why do you ask that?" unflinchingly meeting his fiery gaze. "What right have you to ask such a question, sir?"

"Mebbe I'll jest take the right," with an ugly snarl in his tones. "I picked that same ribbon off o' the bushes down yen' way, close to the camp o' them cussed rev'nue spies—I jest did! An' now I ax ye, Ruth Orton, how did it come to be hangin' up thar, so mighty soon a'ter I see it with my own two eyes, holdin' up your back ha'r?"

"You're quite sure it was my ribbon?"

"Don't I know it was? Did ye ever w'ar ary thing oncet that I couldn't place the next time I see it? Ay! ef it were a year later! Ye know that, Ruth Orton! Ye know that I jest love the ground—"

"And you found my ribbon hanging on a bush, near the camp where Moses Hunter was found—drugged almost to death, you say?"

"I found it thar, as I told ye," with a growl.

"And you want to know how it came there? Ycu demand a plain answer, if I don't misunderstand you, Mr. Branch?"

"Sence you putt it that way—yes, I do!"

"Very well. I'll tell father, and he'll give you a plain answer, the first time you meet him!" laughed the maiden, pushing him to one side, slipping under his out-thrown arm and running lightly up toward the cabin.

Dick Branch started as though to pursue, but paused at the second leap, cursing low but savagely, only ceasing when a peculiar trilling whistle came to his ears, followed a moment later by the guarded words:

"You've played thunder, haven't you, Dick Branch? Can't you ever open your mouth, without sticking your whole foot into it?"

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAIR OF KNAVES.

THE swart-browed mountaineer whirled swiftly at the first sound, a hand dropping to the butt of his revolver; but as those half-angry, half-mocking words came to his ears, his fierce grip relaxed.

"You, Sparks?"

"Who else? Step over this way, out of the moonlight. We two are hardly so love-sick with each other that we can't talk a bit without the moon to help."

"You never ketched 'em, then?"

"Caught—the devil!" with a vicious snarl in his low voice as Branch joined him under the low-branched tree. "We came mighty sight nearer getting caught ourselves! The hurricane just missed us, and that's all. One time I thought—Bah! what's the use?"

"Jest so; what's the use?" came like a gloomy echo. "A p'izen ugly botch, all 'round! An' the wust o' the lot is Mossback Mose!"

"You helped tote him here? He's—what? I heard the girl saying something about him, but wasn't nigh enough to make it out, just then. He's—out with it, can't you, man?"

"He ain't dead yit, ef that's what you want to know."

"Wish he was—for your sake, Dick!" growled Sparks.

"Why fer mine? Why more'n fer your own, dug-gun ye? Ef I put the dope in his bottle, didn't you give it to me? An' didn't you pay me fer doin' of it? Say?"

"Lower, you crack-brain!" hissed Sparks, angrily, thrusting a hand over those heavily bearded lips. "Do you want all the hills to carry him the news?"

"I don't reckon they's any need o' more, when one gal knows it a'ready," with a short laugh that contained precious little heartiness.

"She only suspects—she can't know!"

"Wal, she talked monstrous like it, anyway!"

"And you not only let her talk, but egged her on with— Are you drunk, crazy, or simply a fool for lack of sense, Dick Branch?"

"I'm man a-plenty fer you, Perry Sparks, ef it's a fought ye're huntin' fer!" growled Branch, stepping back a pace with a significant gesture not hard to interpret.

But it was no part of Perry Sparks's scheme to come to blows or burn powder, just then. He knew that he was playing a desperate game, and felt that he might need the backing of a stout fellow like this before his coveted ends were gained.

He laughed softly, his tones softening as he threw a bit of coarse flattery into his next words:

"Not being crazy myself, I'd pick another man than you, Dick, to tackle if I wanted a row. I beg pardon for my words, if they stung you. I hardly knew what I said. This nasty affair has tangled my wits all up, until I have to think twice before I can swear I'm standing on my feet instead of my head."

"All right. I ain't holdin' no grudge. Only—why was I sech a mighty fool fer talkin' back when Ruth rubbed me so hard?"

"Tell me what you meant about finding a ribbon of hers down by that camp, and then I'll answer you, flat-footed, Dick."

Branch hesitated for a brief space. He recalled the grim warning given him by Garl Orton. But he had already disregarded that, in his anger roused by Ruth. And Sparks already knew enough to make it no more dangerous to fully confide in him.

Perry Sparks listened in silence to that muttered recital, the shade cast downward by the bushy-topped tree effectually concealing any emotion his face might otherwise have betrayed. And he was silent for a few moments after Dick Branch ceased speaking, apparently weighing the matter carefully in his mind.

"And you really believe she took all that trouble just to warn a couple of strangers—revenue hounds at that!—to flee?" were his first words, a soft, yet cutting sneer echoing through them.

"What else? Didn't she—"

"Wasn't Mossback Mose acting as their guide? Hadn't he gone back to join his friends? And wasn't we all going after 'em red-hot? Of course; yes, to all points! Well, can't you begin to see through the hole in the mill-stone, Dick?"

"I ain't so mighty—Dug-gun ye, Perry Sparks!" in sullen anger, stung to the quick by—he hardly knew what. "You're hintin' somethin' ag'inst my gal, but ef you dast to—"

"As a friend, Dick, I'm going to open your eyes, even if you try to close mine the next instant—with your bunch of fives!" slowly said Sparks, seemingly too much in earnest to even think of standing on his guard, though a little clearer light would have contradicted that apparent carelessness. "We're both in the same box, old fellow, you and I. Mossback Mose has cut in ahead of me, as you already know; and if he hasn't put a spoke in your wheel, as well, I'm mightily out!"

"You don't—he ain't nakin' up to Ruth?" panted Branch.

"I don't swear to that. All I ask is for you to judge for yourself, from what you've both seen and heard, of late. Think: don't it all go to show the girl is a little scft on Mossback?"

"Ef I thought it, I'd—"

"Mind, Dick, I'm talking as your true friend," his voice soft and sympathetic as he placed a hand on the mountaineer's arm. "Just as I'd both expect and wish you to talk and act toward me under like circumstances. And being your friend, my own troubles haven't kept me so blind to what's been going on as you appear to have been. And so I say again: Ruth is mashed on Mossback Mose, sure as fate!"

"But he don't—Dug-gun it all, man! It's the gal you're playin' fer that he wants, not mine!"

"And he's likely to get her, too, if let run long enough," with a short, bitter laugh that betrayed how much those words cost him. "That will do me up, but how much better will you be? Ruth and Mercy can't both have him; big as he is he can't be divided that way. Losing him, do you flatter yourself she'll turn to you for consolation? Not while Mossback Mose lives, be sure of that, old fellow!"

"Ef she was—what you say," choking at the word, "how much better off'd I be, s'posin' he shouldn't git over the dopin'?"

"Wait a bit, Dick. You say that she more than hinted at our having a hand in doctoring this bottle?"

"She said plump out that it lay atwixt you 'nd me," surlily.

"And Garl Orton leans a bit that way, too—worse luck!" with a vicious snarl in his low tones. "And they seem to think that the sun rises and sets in his shoes! So—how long will they wait before giving Mossback a hint to that effect, when he recovers his senses?"

Dick Branch gave a surly, uneasy growl. Words were unable to do the subject justice, in his estimation.

"Then—what's to hinder his croaking, without regaining his wits long enough to listen to their hints, Dick Branch?"

"You mean—"

"That if you're wise, you'll make the job a clean one without the loss of a minute more than can be helped!"

Thick-headed though he admittedly was, Dick Branch was not altogether a fool, as his next words plainly proved.

"Why should I do it all, when you've got heap sight the most to win by his croakin', Perry Sparks? Sence you're so dead set on gittin' him out o' the way, why not lend him a lift your own self?"

"Didn't you dope his bottle with Devil-weed?"

"Didn't you give me the stuff, an' pay me fer puttin' of it in?"

"Just as I'm willing to pay you for finishing the job," added Sparks, deftly shifting his tactics. "Lay low—watch your chance—well, with no Mossback Mose to the fore, it'll be clear sailing for both of us, Dick, old fellow!"

"Ef Garl Orton an' the boys don't run me up a tree, what'd Ruth hev to say? She'd hit on me, fu'st-off!"

"Not if it seems to be the effect of this dopin'. Not if it's clearly proven that Mossback Mose was selling out the boys—her own father among them, bear in mind. And I'll agree to prove that beyond the possibility of a doubt, even in her mind."

"Ef you're so mighty sure, why don't ye do the job yerself?"

"Because that would be my eternal ruin, don't you see?" impatiently. "You know how General Winston raised the fellow, from a cub. You know how both he and Mercy Winston fairly worships the rascal. Well, if he should be put out of the way, who would they naturally suspect first? Me, of course, since I'm his hot rival for Mercy's hand in marriage. If I couldn't show a clear *alibi*—if I couldn't prove beyond even the shadow of a doubt that I was far away at the time he died—I'd find my cake worse than all dough. Don't you see?"

"That's all right fer you, but how about me?" hesitated Dick.

"You needn't move a step until I've showed you how easy and simple the job will prove. And even if you should be suspected, it'd help rather than hinder you in your love affair. For I'll make it so clear to all that Mossback Mose was deliberately selling his friends and neighbors—Garl Orton in particular—to the revenue officers, that even Ruth would quickly come to look upon the man who punished him as a hero."

"You say you kin prove all that—no lyin', now?"

"Listen, and judge for yourself, Dick," drawing a little closer and speaking rapidly, yet clearly. "You know I've been away for some little time, of late? Well, business of father's took me to St. Louis, and while attending to that, I chanced to run across Mossback Mose."

"He never saw me. I took good care of that. We were never any too good friends, and since I've been after Mercy Winston—but let that pass. You know how it runs, already."

"You know I've hinted, more than once, that I didn't believe Mose was any too good to sell us out, provided he was paid enough. Where else could he get so much money? Not by selling game, and as for work, when did you ever see him put in a solid week, except at Winston's?"

"Don't know as I ever did. But—it's mighty hard to swaller, Perry: mighty tough b'lievin' he'd sell us all out!"

"Wait until I'm through, then tell me what you think, Dick. So—having these old suspicions t' back me—I took to watching Mossback for a spell, and this is about what I made out:

"I saw him time and time again going into a law office, where a big gun connected with the revenue service holds forth. Then he joined company with the two fellows we tried to catch, down yonder near Wolf Creek. They let on he was to guide them into the Ozarks on a hunt, but one, Rob Kendrick he calls himself, is a head clerk in the revenue office at St. Louis, and the other, Owen Price, is a prominent Secret Service officer from the East!"

"You ain't lyin'?" slowly asked Branch, unwittingly betraying his real estimate of his comrade in evil.

"I can back up all I say with proof enough to convince every Hiller in the State," quietly replied Sparks, ignoring that slur. "And if

you'll agree to do your share of the work, I'll show Mossback Mose up after a fashion that will render his very memory a byword and a curse to all—including Garl and Ruth Orton!"

"How?"

"Well, the shortest and surest way would be by capturing those two rascals, and putting them in the sweat-box until they confess the whole trick."

"Ef we'd only ketched 'em!" growled Branch, with a smothered oath.

"We would have done so, only for your sweetness," with a meaning laugh. "It may not be too late, even yet."

"The rain has cleaned out every sign—wuss luck!"

"All sign made up to that time, yes; but they couldn't have gone a great distance in the dark, before the storm broke. And the scent will lay all the better, now."

"Then you 'low to try the dogs?" eagerly asked Branch.

"Of course," with a grim nod. "I've got too much at stake to stop at the first balk, and so have you, if you could only bring yourself to see matters in the right light."

"What do you want me to do, fu'st?" hesitated the mountaineer.

"Nothing, until you've seen or heard from me again. Nothing, that is, but to think it all over, and see for yourself that I'm right. Well, I'm off, after the hounds!"

CHAPTER IX.

A NERVY LITTLE PHILOSOPHER.

WITH a crash that could hardly have been louder to their ears had the mountain itself toppled over, that huge mass of rock under cover of which they had been cowering away from the rain, left its bed of ages and came thundering down across the hole through which the two fugitives had so recently slipped.

The shock was terrific. They were crushed to the rock floor as by an incalculable weight. The entire hill above them seemed crumbling to pieces—fragments were showering down upon them and—

How long that insensibility lasted, or, indeed, if their senses had ever been entirely lost, neither Bob nor Owen could exactly decide.

Probably the dreadful shock partially numbed them, in mind as in body, for through it all they seemed to be aware of a hideous oppression, a sense of slow suffocation, much such as the party in charge of Mossback Mose had experienced when fully exposed to the same storm.

"Rob! Get off my shoulders or I'll— Ugh!" Owen Price was the first to recover his voice, and it came with an angry growl, ending in a hearty grunt as he sent the fragments of stone and debris rattling from his person.

A smothered moan answered him, and that sound of suffering proved as good a restorative as a douche of cold water. It told him his chum was in need of assistance, and though he was still too greatly bewildered to understand just what had happened, it lent him both strength and energy just when those qualities were most valuable.

With a heave and a scramble Owen sent the debris rattling from his shoulders, clearing himself sufficiently to work at doing the same for his friend, whose choking, painful gasps were now audible above the dying buzz in his own ears.

Seemingly Kendrick had fared worse than himself, though little more than his head and neck were buried under the fragments broken from about the hole by the fall of that monster rock. One fragment of considerable weight was resting over the back of his head, and had not its fall come after the rest, the skull itself must have given way beneath the blow.

Owen tossed this stone aside as though it had weighed no more than a feather, then made the lesser particles fly as if his fingers were each a shovel in hands as strong as they were willing, quickly setting Kendrick at liberty so far as he himself had obtained it.

"Brace up, old man!" he cried, far more cheerily than he actually felt, while that horrible doubt lasted. "You're not hurt, and as for being dead, I wouldn't believe that were you to say it with your own blessed lips—I just wouldn't!"

"I'm all—right!" gasped Kendrick, making a clumsy attempt to gain his feet, but failing in those first few moments of weakness. "What's the—what happened?"

"Comet flew the track, or the moon took a tumble—some fool-caper of that nature, I reckon!" cheerfully laughed Owen Price, making use of the opportunity to ascertain the extent of his own injuries.

"I remember—there was a storm, and—merciful heavens!" and Robin Kendrick broke off with a cry of mingled horror and despair as his scattered memory returned with a flash.

He started forward through the intense gloom in the direction of the opening through which they had slipped, just in time to save themselves from being crushed to a bloody pulp beneath that sloping rock. Only to recoil with a despairing cry as his head struck sharply against an immovable mass.

"Steady, old fellow!" cried Owen Price, guided by the sense of touch to his chum, gripping his trembling hands in his own fingers.

"Shut in! Buried alive!" hoarsely panted Kendrick, totally unmanned for the moment by that awful discovery.

"Well, if I was to have a choice, I'd rather go it living than dead, anyway!" laughed Owen. "Because, don't you see, Robin, if a fellow finds it don't pay to keep on wasting breath, he can always put out his light; but if he's once fairly dead, why— Brace up, man, and be a man! Will you let a little runt like me put you to shame?"

If any other lips applied such a term to him, though their owner had been big as a mountain and strong as an oak, the plucky pigmy would never have drawn another breath before avenging the insult; but, just now he had thoughts only how he could best encourage Kendrick, and win him from that heart-breaking despair.

He could hardly have chosen his words better, for he knew his chum thoroughly. Stung by the taunt, Kendrick did "brace up," clearing his lungs, drawing in a full breath, giving his head and shoulders a vigorous shake, then exclaiming:

"You're right, Owen! Brace up goes, but—"

"Full stop before the but, Robin. And thus having got hold of a mighty good resolution by both ends, where's the need of another 'butt' at all? Eh? Sense, if not exactly logic, Mr. Kendrick!"

In the darkness their hands managed to find each other, and in that firm, steady grasp Owen Price read the truth even before the voice and words of his chum told him the victory was fairly won.

"That's all right, Owen. I started to play the fool, but you brought me up with a round turn, and I'll hardly try it on again. If you can make the best of such a bad bargain—"

"Who says it's so mighty bad?"

"How could it be worse?"

"Croaking again—so soon?"

"Never a croak, Owen. Simply looking at the naked truth."

"A confession that proves you never lived in New York, under the reign of Anthony I. However, please draw a modest picture of your undressed fact, and I'll see if I can't find something to make her a bit more presentable. In the first place?"

"We're buried alive!"

"Heap sight better than being buried dead. One for me. Go on."

"Isn't that enough, you cold-blooded rascal?" half angrily growled Kendrick. "How are we ever to get out o' this hobble?"

"Never by sitting down on our hind legs and howling about it, anyway," placidly retorted the nervy little philosopher. "Didn't you say something about having the old bull's-eye with you, Robin?"

"If it hasn't broken with—no! it's all right, I reckon!"

"Strike a light and we'll have a look at our surroundings before composing our epitaphs. Who knows?" with a little laugh that stung keenly despite its cheeriness. "Maybe we've dropped right into that treasure-cave you were looking for, Robin!"

"I'll treasure you if—"

"Glad of it—never was fairly appreciated before. And if we find it impossible to win out o' this, I'll change your name to Desdemona, and call myself— Eh? then you can laugh?"

"Such rank folly would make a cast-iron ghost laugh!"

"Then I'll take a rest," his voice growing sober enough. "I was trying to brace you up, and having done that, my mission's ended."

"Keep it up as long as you can, old fellow," at the same time turning the light from his lantern carefully upon the crushed stone in front of them. "For it wouldn't take much more to knock those same props clean out from under me! You see?"

The entrance was completely closed, that mighty mass having crushed the edges of the rocks to powder, settling down over the opening until even a breath of air could not pass between. And as Kendrick slowly swept the light from side to side, neither pair of eyes could detect aught offering even the faintest ray of hope that they might, in time, and by hard labor, win their way through the rock to the outer world once more.

"Well, it keeps out the wind and the wet," placidly declared Owen Price, seemingly determined to find comfort in everything. "We were trying to get out of the way of both, weren't we?"

"Yes, but hardly at such a cost as this!" muttered Kendrick, with an involuntary shiver creeping over his athletic frame.

"There you go again, breaking out in the same old spot!" snapped Price, with affected irritation. "A harder man to suit I never saw!"

"You'd give a finger for the privilege of joining me in a growl," retorted Kendrick, diverted from his gloomy forebodings in spite of himself. "Only you're so pesky contrary that you're bound to set up in opposition. But what good even such a cross-grained critter as you are,

can extort from this ugly box, passes my comprehension!"

"Which indicates the vast difference between a philosopher and a—ahem!" with an affected cough, then flinging out one hand and gazing admiringly around them as he added: "If we can't get out, no one can come in to disturb our sweet repose, when we conclude to retire to our virtuous couches. You say you've got grub—that knocks out starvation in the first round. I don't suppose you thought to bring along a keg of water, but by wringing our clothes we can get enough dampness to justify our laying the keel of another ark. We've got a waterproof roof above our heads, and no landlord to dun us for pay in advance. So—why not bunk in and have a good night's sleep?"

Instead of listening to this eloquent enumeration of their many advantages, Kendrick was inspecting their surroundings, turning light from his pocket-lantern in all directions, revealing rather more of a cave than either of them had as yet anticipated.

Its exact dimensions could not be fully realized without a more thorough examination, though from the manner in which the rock-roof sloped downward at the rear, Kendrick dared not hope that it was anything more than an ordinary hole in the hillside.

"I've both given and taken plenty worse advice, Robin, though you do affect to turn up your classic nose at it," placidly continued the philosophic pigmy, while following the light with his pinkish eyes. "So I repeat: why not sleep and take things easy? We came to this delightful region in quest of thrilling adventure, didn't we? Well, why growl and grumble, now we've found the first installment?"

"The last, you'd better say!" frowned Kendrick, with a long breath, like one who reluctantly resigns even the faintest hope.

"I say!" sharply ejaculated Owen, as though just struck by a particularly brilliant idea. "Talking about treasure-hunting, does *this* hole resemble anything set down in your map, chart, pedigree—whatever you might be acting upon? Wouldn't it be glorious fun if lucky fortune had picked us up and chucked us down right on top of Captain Kidd's secret hoard? Eh?"

His face and manner, far more than his words, extorted a laugh from those reluctant lips, and once more Kendrick fought back his gloomy forebodings, shamed by that light and happy philosophy into at least an effort to make the best of a bad matter.

"Look for yourself, Owen," he said, taking a well-worn slip of dirty paper from a pocket-book, placing it in the hands of his chum. "This is the chart, or map, or clew to what I verily believe is treasure rich enough to make any one man comfortable for life."

"Provided nobody has found it before him," dryly said Price, at the same time bending a keen gaze upon the document. "And provided it had any foundation on truth in the first place!"

"I made sure of that point before setting out," quietly replied Kendrick. "You'll see the memoranda on the back, if you look. Such an escort was attacked, and an army paymaster really lost the sum named on just that date, in this very region."

"Uncle Sam suffered many such losses, though not always after such an artistic fashion," grimly chuckled Owen Price, rapidly reading the lines of fine, close writing on the fresher sheet of paper to which the worn chart or map had been carefully attached. "As a general thing those who had the chance simply crammed their pockets full, and let it go at that. Truly! the first internal war is a mighty boon—to such as know how to profit by its opportunities!"

"This was a genuine affair, and cost a number of good lives, as well as a few which could easily be spared," said Kendrick, seriously.

"How did it fall into your hands?"

"After a rather peculiar fashion, to tell the whole truth. For one thing, the scent of blood was still fresh upon it when I first came across the map!"

"Hope you didn't do worse than just slug the poor fellow, Robin!"

CHAPTER X.

SUBTERRANEAN EXPLORATIONS.

WITH owl gravity Owen Price gazed up into the handsome face of his chum as he expressed this mild hope, and once more his main object was gained. Kendrick laughed, more like his usual self.

"Sit down, and I'll tell you all about it, Owen."

"Put the light out, then."

"What for?"

"Well, such a yarn ought to sound more deliciously creepy told in the dark, you know. And then—we *may* need what's left of the candle before we find a way out of this hole, you understand."

Their eyes and hands met, and though each forced a smile, no further words were needed to express what was in their minds. On the remnant of that light their very lives might hang!

It was a little risky, judging from the man-

ner in which Kendrick had broken down at the outset, but Owen Price was a shrewd man, and he had made no mistake on this occasion. Instead of weakening, his words served to strengthen his chum.

Robin extinguished the candle, and they sat down side by side in silence until Kendrick refolded the map and placed it in his note-book.

"If you really wish to know all about it—"

"Why not? Don't you think it's about time?"

"I'd have told you at the start, only—"

"We wouldn't have started at all, in that case!"

"Which is precisely why I kept my own counsel," with a short, dry laugh. "Button up, or I'll keep it still longer!"

"I'm buttoned. Go ahead, Sweet Innocent!"

"You've heard of Doctor Mordaunt, who has an office under the same roof with my law office? Well, through him I came into possession of this bit of paper. He got it from a patient in the accident ward of the hospital where he presides. That patient took it from a fellow whom he slugged, a couple of nights before."

"This is the house that Jack built!" murmured Owen Price.

"Something on that style—yes. That patient was slugged in turn; cut deep in a barrel-house row, I believe. At any rate he died of his hurts, shortly after telling his story to Mordaunt, and as no one came forward to claim either his body or the few effects found upon him, the doctor naturally took possession."

"Well, he happened to mention the matter to me, and, after a little talk, gave me the map, as a sort of curiosity, laughing at the idea of there being any truth or money in it."

"Sensible old codger!" murmured Owen. "Remember to introduce me when we get back to civilization, will you, old boy?"

"When we do—with pleasure. But hold your scoffing tongue, if you want me to tell you anything more."

"All right. Do I always snore in my sleep? If it should happen, and disturb you too much, just turn me over on my right side, please!"

"Now, I'll keep you awake just for spite! Sleep if you can, brute!" growled Kendrick, in his harshest tones, rapidly resuming his account of the manner in which the treasure-chart had come into his possession, and his reasons for believing that it was not only genuine, but represented a treasure which as yet remained unappropriated.

He first ascertained that there had been such a paymaster attached to the Federal forces then operating in Missouri and Arkansas, and that he had been robbed by guerrillas of a large sum in money, mainly gold and silver, while being escorted from one station to another.

"It was no self-planned robbery, as you cynically suggested, old man, for the blood was still fresh and the wounded not yet dead, when a detachment of boys in blue came upon the scene. There was a running fight, and then the bushwhackers were cornered in the Ozarks, still clinging to their prize."

"They had time to choose a position where they could hold out against an assault, though the soldiers numbered two to their one. A messenger was sent for reinforcements, and his mates settled down to hold the bushwhackers until he could return with help."

"That took place in due time, and the little fort was carried by storm, nearly every one of the guerrillas being killed. But—nothing was found of the money! That had vanished in some mysterious fashion, and the two rascals captured would say nothing. Nor did they, though it took half a day or more to thoroughly stretch their necks."

"And this map claims to describe just where that treasure was hidden?" asked Owen Price, with awakening interest.

"It does, and I have implicit confidence in it, too! For one thing, I've heard the same story told by men who fought on both sides in the war: from Mossback Mose, for one!"

"Stick a pin right there, pardner!" cried Owen, sharply. "Mossback Mose! And you could marvel how those infernal moonshiners could mistake us for revenue agents! Well, you are innocent, truly!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"What *can* I mean? That your precious guide—your miracle of honor, your forest nobleman, your everything-that's lovely—led us here, simply and solely to sell us to the Philistines, so he could be the first and only one to profit by that same marvelous treasure!"

"I can't think that way, Owen."

"Then don't risk your tender brain by trying. How did you happen to stumble across the fellow, anyway?"

"Through pure chance—luck, as I thought, when I found he was a native of the very region where the treasure had been hidden."

"And of course you told him everything: showed him the map, and begged him to assist you in pocketing the filthy lucre? And he, like a true philanthropist, agreed to do so? Of course he never coveted the rich prize for his own pocket—oh, no!"

"I never let a word drop that could possibly have set him on the track," replied Kendrick,

growing cooler as Owen waxed hotter. "I just brought up the robbery in an off-hand manner, as having happened in the neighborhood of his home, mentioned by himself. I hinted that the unfortunate paymaster had been a distant relative, which was quite enough to account both for my knowledge of the affair, and my curiosity to see something of the locality in which the event had taken place."

"Near here, you say?"

"Unless Mossback lied, it must have been very near where we now are: on this ridge, at any rate."

"Perhaps hidden in this very den!" ejaculated Price, springing to his feet like one electrified, not a little to the amusement of his chum. "Light up, old baby, and we'll have a look, anyway!"

"Don't you reckon we'd better sleep a little, first?" drawled Robin, only to have the lantern snatched from his hand by the sputtering of a match which Price had already drawn across the rock-floor.

"You're right: sleep goes!" snapped Owen, dropping the match without lighting the lantern. "Thanks for reminding me of the sweet duty."

But Kendrick also shifted, lighting the lantern, speaking without any further attempt at disguise, his pale, even haggard face showing how seriously he regarded their situation.

"I can't sleep, even if you can, Owen. I feel like one in a sealed tomb! I must be moving as long as there is anything further to learn. And—I forgot to bring any other light with me. This one can't last very much longer, and if it should expire before we find our way out—"

"You shut!" snapped Owen, almost viciously, as he snatched the lantern from the hand of his chum and turned toward the rear of the cave. "If Job had had just one such delicious comforter as you, he'd have died too mighty sudden to ever have passed into a proverb!"

Kendrick made no answer, for just then the widening fan of light showed an unlooked-for extension of the hole: literally a hole, since even Owen had to crouch while making his way through it closely followed by his chum.

"Whooray!" cried the pigmy, waving the bull's-eye about his head the better to exhibit the sudden expansion within the rock. "Who said we wasn't in luck? Another Mammoth Cave—well, it's mammoth enough for our bigness, if not quite so mammoth as the original," he added, in more moderate tones.

The chamber, plainly the work of nature, unassisted by man, though destitute of the glittering ornaments usually found in limestone regions, was spacious enough. Its roof was barely visible by the rays of the lantern, while the side walls were several rods apart. The floor was comparatively level, covered with coarse fragments which had dropped through past ages from the roof.

They had entered the chamber at one end, as it were, and after a brief inspection of walls and floor, Owen pressed onward, finding yet another neck-like passage at the opposite extremity, through which he pressed with increased ardor, if possible.

"Keep a-going, and we'll come out on the other side of the range, without having the trouble of crawling up and sliding down again!" he laughed, as the passage led them into a third enlargement, more extensive than either of the other chambers.

"Listen!" excitedly whispered Kendrick, clutching Owen by an arm the instant the little fellow ceased speaking.

A dull, seemingly distant murmuring sound was heard, but of what that sound was born, they could only conjecture, as yet.

"Sounds like a mill running—or a mill-dam leaking!" muttered Owen, who was practical if anything.

"Or—a subterranean river roaring!" whispered Kendrick, the thought born of tales he had read of underground explorations.

"Well, it isn't such a mighty dam—loud roaring as to scare two healthy fellows out of their shoes, anyway," unblushingly asserted the pigmy, his pinkish gray eyes innocent as those of a baby as they gazed up into Robin's face. "Wonder what the miller extorts?"

Kendrick snatched the lantern from his hand, starting hastily forward, eager to set all doubts at rest. Curiously enough, that sound left him renewed hopes of ultimately escaping from that living tomb, though doubtless it would have puzzled him to explain just why it should.

It was well that he cast the light squarely ahead of them, for otherwise they might have solved the secret of that faint, sullen roaring only too quickly for safety. As it was, he recoiled from the very brink of a pit, black as night, with a low ejaculation of mingled surprise and fright.

"So near—I thought it was a full mile away!" he gasped, fairly trembling at their narrow escape.

Owen Price, recovering from that sharp collision, slipped to one side, bending over the brink and vainly tried to distinguish the waters murmuring far below their feet.

"Enough sight further off than I care to go—by the only route I see open, that is!" he grimly

chuckled, true to his love of catching up the words of his chum.

"Careful, Owen!" warned Kendrick, coming forward with the light, casting it downward until the black, sullen-seeming water was dimly revealed. "A trip or a stumble—"

"Thanks! I'm pretty comfortable as it is, without—looks like a river of pretty fair ink, don't it, old fellow?"

"Looks like the river Styx!" moodily muttered Kendrick, gazing downward like one fascinated, though after a grim, repulsive fashion.

"Styx—sticks—and sticks float, eh?" slowly said Price, casting a quick glance up into the face of his chum. "Wonder if there's any—Steady with the light, please! I can use my fingers if I have to!" he murmured, resignedly, crushing his handkerchief into a tight ball, then dropping it down over the brink, eagerly watching the result.

The white cloth looked like a little ball of foam on the black surface, and that there was a strong current, the rapidity with which the light fabric was carried away to their right, plainly proved.

"There's a hint, and I'm the hinter-inventor!" cried Owen, with a short, quick laugh. "If worst comes to worst, what's to hinder our going in swimming, and coming out—"

He never finished that sentence!

Without the slightest warning, the edge of the rock crumbled under his feet, and with a wild cry, Owen Price fell swiftly down into the darkness—down, to plunge into that black river with a sullen splash!

Only that: one cry, a splash—then silence!

CHAPTER XI.

HOW SPARKS KINDLED A FIRE.

THE sun was just rising when Perry Sparks put out his hand and drew aside a pendent vine which had been partially torn from its chosen support by the high wind of the night just passed. This gave him an unobstructed view of the buildings opposite, and he paused to reconnoiter before advancing further.

Nothing grand: simply a comfortable mountain home, constructed for the most part of hewn logs so far as the walls were concerned; but this home of Jerome Winston—better known among the Hillers as "General Winston"—and his daughter Mercy, was by far the finest residence in that part of the State, and an object of actual awe to many of the ignorant "Hillers" who came scores of miles to gaze upon the marvel of beauty, comfort and "bigness!"

The main building was two story, the hewn logs neatly joined, and painted a neutral color. A veranda extended along the front, in true Southern fashion, the supports now wreathed with flowering vines.

To the rear stood a "summer kitchen," which in later days would be transformed into the winter smoke-house. To the right was a smaller log cabin intended for the two old negroes, man and wife, who served "Marse Giner!" just as faithfully now that freedom was theirs, as they could have done "af' de wahl!"

To the left were stable, sheds, pens for cows and hogs; all the rude structures which grow up in company with a country home.

Early as the hour was, a column of bluesmoke rose from both main house and kitchen, and Perry Sparks was doubtless correct when he mumbled something about breakfast.

The storm had wrought no particular damage in that quarter, so far as his hasty glance over the ground could determine; but that it had been one of unusual force and powers of destruction, the young man had long since been convinced.

It was not much past midnight when he parted from Dick Branch, near the Orton spring, and he counted on reaching the Winston place long before daylight. He hoped to coax away the brace of dogs—sturdy mongrels, but with a strong cross of the bloodhound—before any of the people were astir, without the formality of asking permission.

Not that he feared refusal by Jerome Winston, should he explain just what the bounds were wanted for; on that point the old soldier was in perfect accord with his neighbors, hating revenue officers as the true emissaries of the devil: but—Mossback Mose was mixed up in the ugly affair, and Perry Sparks did not care about putting himself forward as a main mover in what might prove disastrous to the "Bald Hornet."

But in this hope he was frustrated, thanks to the work of the tornado. Wind and water combined had so seriously obstructed his path that it had only been by the hardest of work that he covered the distance at all, until aided by the breaking of dawn.

Eager as he had been to secure possession of the bounds, now that he was fairly in sight of their kennel, Perry Sparks apparently forgot all about them, his glowing eyes and darkly handsome face betraying an interest of quite a different sort as he gazed upon the mountain home.

"Something powerful queer about 'em! Monstrous queer!" he muttered, barely above his breath. "But what? I'd give a couple of fingers to know; but—how to find out?"

Yet if one had taken the time and trouble to question the neighbors, far and near, from one end of the hills to the other, probably not one among them all would have agreed with Perry Sparks on that point. True, Jerome Winston led a very quiet, secluded life, but there surely was nothing criminal, nothing suspicious, nothing even unusual about his manner of existence.

Every one knew that he had served throughout the late war, doing his duty as a Southerner, only laying down his arms when the fighting ceased for all time. He bore honorable scars received in battle. He still clung to the Confederate gray, so far as his own clothes were concerned. He treasured a stained, worn, bullet-pierced flag which seemed far more beautiful to the eyes of those old soldiers, born and bred mountaineers, than the one before which its star had forever set. But that was all.

He had played his part as he deemed right, and it might be that he still held firm to that belief; but, the war was over, and he had no curses for those who had conquered.

Nothing queer about that! He had neighbors who held the same sentiments, some of them even louder, if no stronger.

"But it's *there*—there, dead sure!" scowled Perry Sparks. "And if I can't get at it by hook, I'll find out by crook!"

He might have said more, as angry, blooded fellows are apt to when once losing rein over their ugly thoughts; but, just then a tall, graceful, light-clad figure came through the front door, pausing for a few moments at the edge of the veranda, casting a quick glance over the really pleasing landscape before setting foot on the top one of the broad, shallow steps leading from porch to ground.

"Mercy—my angel!"

In what was little better than a gasp—painful because of its intensity—Perry Sparks pronounced that name, leaning forward with his dark face flushing, his black eyes glowing vividly, his sinewy fingers crushing the vine between them until the fresh sap trickled down.

One who saw him then, would have been troubled to decide whether he loved or hated that fair maiden. Of the fierceness of his passion, whichever it was, there could be no room for doubt.

Mercy Winston drew the light, fleecy scarf from neck to head, then lightly tripped down the steps, passing away from the house and strolling carelessly forward, unwittingly drawing nearer the covert where, after that first moment of passion, Perry Sparks had hidden face and figure.

His eyes glowed redly as it seemed that he would not have to alter his location in the least to win an early interview with the maiden whom he loved so madly; but, Mercy was simply out for a breath of fresh air while breakfast was being prepared by Aunt Chloe, and turning aside before reaching that covert, she would never have suspected the vicinity of another, had not Perry Sparks, acting on an impulse which he made no effort to combat, swiftly cut her off from the house.

She caught the sounds of his hasty footfalls, and turned with a little exclamation of—well, if her delight was wholly unalloyed at that discovery her charming face could tell something besides truth.

"Good-morning, Mercy," said Sparks, doffing his hat and bowing, but through all acting after the free-and-easy style of the mountains. "Out bright and early, ain't ye?"

"Good-morning, Mr. Sparks," with a courtesy far too deep to be that of a girl greeting a lover. "I'm just going back to the house. I'm not sure father is up, but—"

"I'd rather see you, Mercy. No disrespect to the general, of course. But—not even a finger to shake, Mercy?"

"I don't know—must I?" forcing a little laugh as she drew back her dainty hand from those grimy fingers, the real condition of which their owner had not until now realized.

His hand was spotted with dry mud, and a red streak crossed its edge where stone or stick had broken the skin. He forced a laugh as he drew the disfigured member back, stammering:

"I forgot—I had a tumble or two in the dark, and—"

"Then you better deserve the title of early bird, it seems. Do you know if the storm wrought much damage last night? Or were you out in it?" flashing a quick glance over his disordered dress.

"Some damage to the timber, but I reckon no lives were lost. And I was out in it—in the edge of the hurricane, for that matter. But what brought me here so early was, I wanted to borrow the dogs to put on the trail—to use for a while, I mean."

"To put on the trail of—what?" just a little sharply asked Mercy Winston, gazing squarely into that dark face, though, as a rule, she preferred avoiding an encounter with those black eyes.

Perry Sparks hesitated, but only for a single breath. He knew that Jerome Winston thoroughly sympathized with the Hillers in their firm belief that they had a perfect right to turn their produce into whisky if they chose, without leave or license from anybody or anything save

their own will. He knew, too, that Mercy inclined to the same belief, that the revenue laws were not only wrong but outrageous. It was not for a fear of shocking her that he hesitated, so much as remembering that Mossback Mose was the actual owner of the two hounds.

"Revenue spies—no less!" he flashed, crisply. "Of course I can take the pups?"

"Well, if I had the right," hesitated Mercy, a soft flush tinging her fair cheek as she added in lower tones: "Their master is away from home, and he thinks so much of them that—"

She stopped short, looking up with an air of surprised haughtiness at that harsh, rude laugh. So plainly did she betray her dislike in that moment, that Perry Sparks forgot his wiser resolutions, giving free rein to his vicious jealousy.

"Why don't you spit out the whole truth?" he coarsely cried, his eyes fairly ablaze. "Why don't you say that Mossback Mose would rather slit their throats than have them open on the track of a revenue shark—his sworn friends?"

"You are insulting, sir!" proudly said Mercy, turning toward the house, only to be checked by a fiercer grip on her arm. "How dare you!"

"I dare tell you the plain truth for once in a way, Mercy Winston," he grated, casting all prudence to the winds in his savage jealousy.

"I mean to say that the hounds are apt to do better work for me on such a trail than they would for their master—perfect as you seem to think him!"

"He is perfect—in comparison with Perry Sparks!" was the spirited retort.

"So others besides you may think; but they come from outside the Ozarks, and in disguise!"

"What do you mean to insinuate, sir?"

"That Mossback Mose would be far more apt to aid the spies than assist in bringing them to a just reward—no less!"

"You—if I were a man, I'd call you liar!"

"And so betray your blissful ignorance of the truth, Miss Winston," he laughed, bowing in mock respect, yet maintaining his grip against her sudden attempt to break away. "Not yet—don't be in such a hurry, I beg of you, Mercy. I've said too much—"

"Far more than you can ever answer for with whole bones, Mr. Sparks! When Mr. Hunter returns—"

"Then he hasn't taken the trouble to call on you since his return from St. Louis?" interrupted Sparks, arching his jetty brows in mock surprise.

"He has not returned from St. Louis."

"Begging pardon, but he has: two full days ago, to my certain knowledge. I saw him up at Orton's, yesterday, and heard him tell Garl that he had been back a day or more. Surely it couldn't be that pretty Ruth has—did I hurt you, dear?"

Mercy had shrunk from those malicious words, with a quick catching of her breath, but at his mock sympathy she rallied, ceasing her efforts to free her arm, facing him proudly, defiantly, her dark eyes flashing even more brightly than his own.

"I always deemed you a cur, Perry Sparks, and now I know you are worse: a cowardly falsifier!" she said, her tones cold and cutting. "Let go my arm, or—shall I call for help?"

"If I'm a coward, I'm not a traitor. I may be bad enough, but how much worse is Mossback Mose? How much worse is the man who can call the Hillers his bosom friends and loved neighbors, yet with his next breath denounce them to the Government as law-breakers, and offer to sell their lives or liberties for a paltry reward?"

"Whom do you accuse of such a foul act of treachery, Mr. Sparks?"

"Mossback Mose, your favored lover!" was the vicious retort. "He guided those revenue spies here, to sell out his neighbors, and—"

"Liar!" rung out her clear, proud tones, and her free hand smote him sharply on the lips.

CHAPTER XII.

SHOOTING AT ONE AND HITTING ANOTHER.

It was only the hand of a girl—a fair, soft, dainty hand, unmarred by hard labor, doomed to naught more toilsome than the lightest of household cares where love and affection were ever watchful to lighten even those easy burdens—yet Perry Sparks, strong, hardy man though he was, staggered visibly under the blow, tasting his own blood as he mechanically sucked in his bruised lips.

Had she been less proud, Mercy Winston might have escaped by hasty flight, for the ruffian's hold was broken by the shock—mentally as great as it was physically severe—and the hand which had left its cruel imprint on her arm instinctively flew back, fingers covering his stinging lips.

She did step back, too proud to turn in flight, and quickly rallying, Perry Sparks sprang forward and clasped her in his arms with a fierce, devilish glow filling his eyes.

"You little spit-fire!" he hoarsely panted; but before he could say or do more, there came a pleasant call from the not distant house.

"Mercy, daughter!"

"Father!"

"The old man!"

Maid and man spoke in the same breath, and the sound of that voice recalled Perry Sparks to his senses. He released the maiden, and drew back. Possibly with the intention of taking to his heels in flight, for veteran though he was, Jerome Winston was still stout and active enough to make a good fight in behalf of one whom he loved.

But if such was his purpose, Mercy foiled it.

"Stop!" she cried, her tones ringing out cold and stern, her face very pale, but her dark eyes flashing vividly. "You have foully slandered one who is high above your level as the sky is above yonder mud-hole! I dare you to repeat your words before my father—and his friend!"

"What if I don't choose to follow your beck and nod?" sulkily growled the ruffian, flashing a look past her trim, proud figure to where Jerome Winston stood on the veranda, peering curiously in that direction under his curved palm.

"You shall answer—if not now, when Moses Hunter comes back from St. Louis, where he is—"

"Mossback Mose is snoring away in a drunken stupor at Orton's cabin, more like a fat hog than a hero such as you—"

"Father!" cried Mercy, but without averting her glowing gaze from that darkly handsome face before her. "Ask Perry Sparks to come into the house. He says he has seen Moses, and—"

"I'm coming, General Winston!" said the young mountaineer, once more yielding to his worst passions, though he forced a mask of smiling carelessness. "Will you accept my arm, dear Mercy?"

She scorned to reply, other than by an imperious wave of a hand in the direction of her home. Sparks bowed with mock humility, then walked swiftly to the veranda, bowing in response to the kindly salutation given him by Winston, but declining the proffered hand.

"I fear I'd be accused of shaking under false pretenses, general," he said, with a cynical smile as he glanced toward Mercy, who caught the old soldier by an arm and hurried him inside the building. "Your fair daughter has taken offense at my letting escape a few blunt facts, and—"

"He has dared to most vilely slander Moses, papa!" panted Mercy, her eyes dimming for an instant with unshed tears.

"What am I to understand by all this, Mr. Sparks?" a little stiffly demanded the veteran, glancing from face to face, his bent figure straightening up until, despite the infirmities of years and wounds, he looked every inch a soldier.

"Perhaps Miss Winston would rather tell her story first, general," coldly bowed the young mountaineer, leaning on the back of a chair, but making no move toward seating himself.

Without waiting for permission, Mercy poured forth the charges, veiled as well as open, which Perry Sparks had brought against Moses Hunter.

That person listened in silence, even smiling a bit as the soldier flashed an indignant glance upon him. Now that the storm which he had so rashly provoked was fairly over his head, Perry Sparks showed no signs of flinching, though this open rupture had been far from his intentions when drawing near that home.

He was cool enough to see how hard it was for Jerome Winston to refrain from bursting forth into angry ejaculations while listening to the hurried explanation given by his daughter; but his training as a soldier stood him in good stead, now, and he even let a few seconds pass by after Mercy ceased, before he spoke.

"You have heard what my daughter said, Mr. Sparks," he uttered, in cold, steady tones, though his eyes flashed with all the fires of younger days while resting on that darkly handsome face.

"I have listened very attentively, General Winston: yes," bowed the young mountaineer.

"Do you deny the perfect accuracy of her charges?"

"They are a great deal more truthful than she would care for me to swear, I reckon," with a low, abrupt laugh. "But if you mean, has Miss Winston accurately reported my words, I'll say—barring a little exaggeration, perfectly natural in one so excited—yes, sir, she has!"

Jerome Winston had to turn away for a brief space, fighting down his fierce passions, so thoroughly were they aroused by what his daughter had said and by this insolent knave's manner. But the victory was quickly gained, and once more confronting the young man, he said:

"You positively accuse Moses Hunter of being in league with the hounds of the revenue, sir?"

"In one word, General Winston, I swear that the hills are full of your neighbors, hunting for two revenue spies whom your adopted son, Moses Hunter, guided into these regions," deliberately spoke Sparks.

"Father! tell him he is a liar!" panted Mercy, unable to contain her indignation any longer. "Tell him that—"

"Quiet, child!" frowned the old soldier, with a degree of harshness such as Mercy had never before received from. "Trust me to get at the

whole truth, if truth there be in— I'll shoot you like a cur, sir!" he harshly growled, turning once more to confront his enemy. "I will brand you as a liar and a coward, then kill you without mercy—unless you make your words good in every detail!"

"Hard words and precious little politeness to back 'em up," Perry Sparks sneered, his own manner changing for the worse. "You don't stand on ceremony, neither will I. Sit down, won't you?" dropping into a chair without invitation.

Once more he quickly repented acting on impulse, and rising, with a faint flush, he mumbled an apology.

"I was out in the hurricane last night. I've had no rest, and as it's a rather long story—please sit down, general, and you, Miss Winston. If not—well, reckon I can stand it!"

"Sit down, father," gently said Mercy, complying herself, though solely on his account. "I'll be over soonest, thus."

"Be sure I'll make it as short as I can, in justice to myself," Sparks said, when all were seated, smiling grimly. "It's not such an agreeable duty that—"

"To the point, if you please, Mr. Sparks," curtly interrupted the old soldier. "Just what do you charge my son with committing?"

"Your adopted son: a Winston could never have stooped so low—"

"Quiet, Mercy! Will you speak out? Shall I force you at the point of my old saber?"

"I said that Mossback Mose was not at St. Louis, but at the cabin of Carl Orton. I saw him at the still, myself, yesterday, not long after noon. I heard him say that he had been in camp near Wolf Creek for at least one day; how much longer I didn't just catch."

"How does this fact—if fact it is—prove Moses Hunter a traitor to his friends and neighbors?"

"Simply contributory, general," forcing a smile. "I can give you the names of nearly a dozen good and true men who saw and heard him, for Mossback Mose was drinking like a fish, and was too drunk—"

"Father! how can you listen—"

"Quiet, Mercy! Let him run the length of his rope. Then— Will you go on, Mr. Sparks?"

"If permitted, with pleasure, sir! As I was saying, Mose was drinking freely, and so grew more reckless than he otherwise would, no doubt. For, when asked about his movements, of late, he said that he was acting as guide to a couple of young city chaps, up here for a hunt; that they pretended to be very anxious to get a buck or two, but that they were after heap sight bigger game than any that ever sported antlers."

"How do you make treason out of that?" demanded Winston.

"It wasn't so much his words as his manner, understand, general. He laughed as he said it, and a little later hinted that he knew just who they were, and what they were after in the Hills. He declared that they had tried to blind him as to their real aim, at first, but that he was not long in getting at the truth; that he knew just what they were hunting for, and that after he'd had a bit of sport fooling them, he'd show them precisely where their game harbored."

"He said all this, before so many witnesses? Yet you have the infernal impudence and audacity to accuse him of being—bah! you are either drunk or crazy, Perry Sparks!"

"Moses Hunter was, beyond a doubt, general," was the cool retort. "I never knew him to drink so freely before. To do him simple justice, he acted more like a man out of his wits than like his old self. But—to cut it short—he was not so near drunk that he couldn't realize he had said too much for safety, and mumbling something about having to get back to camp, he left the cave."

"Of course there was plenty of talk after he went. He'd let out too much for anything else. And when it was proved that Mose had been seen haunting a revenue office in St. Louis, while—"

"Proven by whom?"

"By me, general. And I also swore then, what I swear now, that the two pretended hunters Mose guided here, really are Owen Price, a prominent Secret Service officer, from Washington, and Robert Kendrick—"

He broke off abruptly, for with a sharp, gasping ejaculation, General Winston fell back in his chair, his face turning ghastly pale, his eyeballs widely dilated, threatening to burst from their sockets.

Mercy uttered a shriek of affright, and Perry Sparks sprung to his feet, hesitating whether to flee or to offer assistance.

But, with a desperate effort Jerome Winston rallied, hoarsely gasping forth the words:

"Don't—it's nothing but—I'm all right—Mercy!"

"Father—dear father! What can I do for you?" sobbed the terrified girl, sinking to her knees by his chair, clasping her trembling arms about his bowed, shivering figure. "Let me call—"

"No—I'm all right," steadying his voice with a marvelous exhibition of will, facing Perry

Sparks and adding: "Go on. You followed after Moses Hunter. What did you do—after?"

"We found Mossback Mose at the camp, lying in a drunken stupor, but the two spies had taken the alarm—from whose lips maybe you can guess—and run away before the storm."

"How do you know they were spies? You have offered no positive proof, as yet, sir."

"Proof enough to convince every man who took part in the hunt, last night, General Winston, and such positive proof that when Mossback Mose recovers from his drunken debauch, he'll find it—"

"He'll find *you*, Perry Sparks!" sternly cried the general, rising to his feet and pointing through the open door. "Go, you miserable calumniator of a man whose soles you are unworthy to lick! Go! or, by the gods of war! I'll boot you off the place my own self, old as I am!"

"I'll go—until you have had time to regain your senses, sir!" stiffly bowed Sparks, leaving the room and house, only pausing for a backward glance when at the edge of the forest.

"What was it hit him so hard? That name? What is Kendrick to him? If I could only solve that riddle! If? *I will!*" with a low, hard laugh. "And then I'll work it—I'll make you bend or break, my beauty!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WORSE MISFORTUNES THAN BEING LOST.

ROBIN KENDRICK made an instinctive grab at his chum as he saw him falling, though it could hardly be said that he did so with a full realization of the awful truth. That began to reach his brain when Owen Price gave that sharp cry, and he seemed to feel the rock crumbling beneath his own feet.

He fell rather than sprung back, the lantern flying from his unnerved fingers, the shock extinguishing the light, and—

That one shrill scream of despairing fear—that one sullen splash as the black water was entered—then an awful silence.

Even the sullen mutterings of the dark waters seemed to subside, as though, having secured the human sacrifice for which they had been waiting so long, they were now content.

Then—was he going mad? Was it—

"Help! Rob—turn the light—quick!"

Kendrick gave a gasping cry, starting to his feet, those words ringing in his ears, yet seemingly coming from miles away. He surely heard them, uttered by the voice of his chum, Owen Price? And yet—

"Rob, I say!" came that voice, louder, clearer, far more impatient than one would expect from one so recently dead. "Have you gone—to sleep?"

"Owen—I'm coming to—"

"Don't—look out!" came a warning cry with a distinctness that told how fully in earnest the unseen speaker was. "If you jump down on me, I'll lick—where's the light?"

"I've dropped it. Can you hold on until—"

"It's a ground-hog case, I reckon!" with a touch of his old-time reckless cynicism. "Only—don't be longer than the law allows!"

It was fortunate for both that Owen Price was able to speak after his old, reckless manner, for while it assured Kendrick that he could have received no serious injury by his unlucky tumble, it also helped to clear away the sickening, stupefying numbness which had come over the—seemingly—stronger refugee at the supposed loss of his chum.

"Hang fast—I'll find it, and—don't fail, for Heaven's sake!" he cried, striking a match, and waiting for the sulphur to permit a clear blaze, fearing to stir from his tracks lest he also fall, and thus doom both to a miserable death.

"I'll hang on—for my own sweet sake, if you don't mind the substitution, old boy! But—found it yet?"

"Yes, and—thank Heaven!" with a long breath of intense relief, as he found the lantern had not been injured by its fall.

It took another match to complete the work, but Kendrick was rapidly recovering from that awful shock, and acted quickly.

Turning the blaze as high as possible, he bent over the treacherous brink, where the fresh marks showed him the precise point down which his chum had fallen. Kendrick cast the rays downward, to give vent to a cry of joy as he caught sight of that pale upturned face.

"Steady, Rob!" warningly cried Owen. "If you throw dirt down in my eyes, I'll lick thunder out o' you when I— Just work your way a bit further down—stream, will you?"

Imperfect though the light was, it proved sufficient to reveal the main facts: to show that though Owen Price had fallen clear of the few rock-points which jutted out from the wall, into the water where it was far beyond his depth, he had risen again before the current could sweep him more than a few feet, instinctively flinging out his arms, striking a rock with one hand, his fingers instantly closing on the point with a death-grip.

Had he been one whit less muscular, or had his body been of much greater bulk, the fiercely tugging current would almost surely have broken his frail hold on that damp, slimy rock be-

fore he could aid it, by securing a grip with his left hand. As it was, only one out of a thousand could have even thought of jesting while in such frightful peril.

Of the pair, Owen seemed far the cooler and clearer-brained, though it is possible that the case might have been different had their conditions been changed, as well. For Kendrick was certainly not a coward where only his own life was at stake.

"You needn't mind about coming *all* the way down, Robin," sharply called out the pigmy, as Kendrick leaned perilously far over the brink in his eagerness to cast the light as far down as possible. "For one thing, you'd catch your rheumatic death: it's mighty damp down here!"

"What can I do? How can I help you, dear boy?" huskily cried Rob.

"Just button up until I can—a bit more to the right: steady!"

Complying as perfectly with each deliberate direction as lay in his power, Kendrick moved the light from side to side, while Owen Price thoroughly examined the wall above his head.

"Couldn't do it if I had claws like a cat, old fellow!" was his cool decision, a few moments later.

"But you've got to—I'll save you, Owen, or share your fate!"

"If you don't, I'll sue you for damages in the other world. Of course you'll save me, with my help. I just meant that I couldn't climb yonder without asking you to strip—"

"My hide, if you say so!"

"We'll try your clothes, first," with a short laugh.

Hastily placing the lantern in a position where no harm could come to it, Kendrick quickly removed his clothes, knotting the garments together tightly, then lowered one end of the rude rope to his chum.

Holding the light so that Owen could make sure of a firm grip, and prepare to steer clear of the few rock-points jutting from the damp wall, Kendrick braced his muscles, and when the word came, he slowly and carefully drew his chum out of danger.

"Get out, critter!" spluttered Price, avoiding the arms of his agitated chum by a deft duck and skip. "You'll get me all wet, and—"

Kendrick sank down in a limp, unnerved heap, covering his face with his hands, shivering with powerful emotion. Now that Owen was safe, he began to realize what a terrible strain those few minutes had been.

Price moved softly to his side, resting a hand on that bowed head, the lack of light hiding his own strong emotion, though something of it was revealed by the unwonted quaver in his voice as he spoke:

"Brace up, Robin! It's all right. I just went down yonder to investigate a bit, and—there *is* a current, old fellow! Strong enough to send us head-first through a stone-wall, like a diamond-drill through a thawed-out squash!"

Where anything like sentiment would have failed to brace Kendrick up, until after his pent-up emotions had at least partly exhausted themselves, this bit of pathos worked to perfection. And with a laugh that was not altogether forced, Robin sprang to his feet.

"You blessed old fraud! Even death couldn't teach you sense!"

"Which goes far to explain why we are so congenial? But spare your compliments, old fellow, and let's pursue our investigations a little further."

"How can we?" muttered Kendrick, his spirits sinking as rapidly as they had risen, picking up the lantern and sweeping it along to show the chasm crossing their original course at right angles. "And I'm completely worn out with—"

"You just think so, old boy," laughed Owen, taking the light from his hand and moving to the right, or in the direction of the current below. "Take a seat, and wait for my homecoming, will you?"

That was not long. A few rods in that direction brought him to the end of his explorations, so far as that course was concerned, for though the chamber could hardly be said to come to an end, it simply formed a vaulted roof over the river, the wall coming down to the brink without leaving room for a rat to find passage.

"No thoroughfare in that direction, at all events," said Owen, not a whit less cheerily, as he retraced his steps, passing close by the spot where Kendrick, his garments put on, was squatting on the rock. "If things don't pan out a little more cheerful *this* way, reckon I'll have to join you in your cheerful little game of doleful dumps!"

Kendrick hardly noticed his words or his passage. He had undergone a terrible strain, and was now feeling the reaction, though his pulse was quieting and his nerves were growing a bit more steady. All he required was rest and quiet for a few minutes.

Meanwhile Owen Price was busy, making the best possible use of the bull's-eye lantern, resolved to learn the whole truth as quickly as possible. And after a few moments of chilling discouragement, when his first imperfect view told him the passage at that end was barred in precisely the same manner as at the other, he

made a discovery which drew a sharp, glad cheer from his lips.

"Tell me I didn't know it, will ye?" he almost howled, swinging the lantern around his head as an aid to his cheering. "Come this way, you croaking prevaricator! Come and look at my boulevard! Come and— Now aren't you ashamed of yourself, Robin Kendrick? S-a-y?"

Fairly glowing with triumph, Owen Price swept the light along the discovery which was owing to his persistence, and though Kendrick failed at first to make out the "road," he finally concluded that it might be possible for a steady-brained, sure-footed man to pass to the other side of the river.

"Nothing like doing a thing when you set about it, is there?" Owen chuckled, starting to creep along the narrow ledge which fairly overhung the river. "Hello! talk about your roads! If this isn't a public highway, then what's the matter with these marks?"

Kendrick cut short a startled exclamation, bending over the signs pointed out by Owen, following them some little distance along the ledge; and then, as Price had kept close at his heels during the investigation, finding it impossible to turn or back out.

"Just what I calculated on, Robin," coolly laughed Price. "Go on. Never turn back, is my present motto. Crawl! or I'll strike a match and play you're a box-shell tortoise!"

There was no alternative, and Kendrick crept onward, using the light both to pick his perilous way, and to examine those tell-tale marks at brief intervals. He knew that they had been made by feet of some sort, though whether they were human, or belonging to some wild beast, he could only guess.

With no little difficulty the passage was accomplished, and by the light the refugees could see there was yet a considerable extension of the cavern to be explored.

"Enough to keep us so interested that we'll have no time to remember that we're lost!" complacently chuckled Owen Price.

"There's worse misfortunes even than being lost, if your crack-brain was only steady enough to comprehend the truth!" frowned Kendrick, turning the light lower and covering the glass with a hand. "If those tracks were made by human feet, can you guess all that means?"

"That where one man has gone, another can pass: of course!"

"That if men have made that trail, those men are moonshiners!"

"Well, what of it? I'm not much of a wine-bibber, as a rule, but just at this present moment, I feel that I could immensely enjoy a square suck at a juicy worm! Of the genus moonshine, of course."

"Will you never be sober, man?" frowned Kendrick, half-angrily. "I tell you, Owen, if what I begin to suspect be truth—if those marks were really made by two feet instead of four—we'd better have faced the music back at camp, for if we're caught in here by the moonshiners (and they're the only cave-dwellers I know of in these parts), they'll swear we're spies, sure enough!"

"If—and if—and while you keep on adding to the score, I'm going to drop down and take a snooze, just for luck!" yawned the pigmy, feeling the effects of his recent exertions.

He curled up in a smooth a spot as he could find handy, and with marvelous nerve—or insensibility, perhaps—seemed to drop off asleep before Kendrick could shape a remonstrance. And then, though after long and troubled thought, Robin imitated his example.

To be finally awakened by Owen, who excitedly muttered in his ear.

"Rouse up, Rob! If I don't smell sour mash, may I never live to see Kentucky blue grass again!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

KENDRICK sprang to a sitting posture, with a stifled cry, staring blankly around them, for the moment unable to realize what had happened or where they were.

Of course all was intensely dark, for he had carefully extinguished the lantern before lying down. And only for the swift throbbing of his own heart, all was silent but the low, sullen murmur of the river.

Until he caught the sound of Owen Price working his flexible nostrils, sniffing at the damp air like a hungry hound scenting food.

"Sour mash, or I never set foot inside of a distillery!" declared Price, a moment later. "And where there's drink of that description, there's mighty apt to be men: and when men are nigh, food is not very far distant! Ergo, we'll have breakfast or—"

"Be still, Owen!" warningly muttered Kendrick, groping for his chum and gripping his shoulder almost fiercely. "If those devils discover us, we're lost!"

"Now you're talking sense, Robin!" mocked the pigmy. "Of course we can't be found without first being lost, but how you manage to make out that we're lost if we are found, passes my limited comprehension! Or—has that delicious odor intoxicated you, already?"

"You know what I mean. You're not such a fool as to overlook the truth. You know that if we're sighted by the moonshiners, they'll be so dead sure we're in here solely and simply for the purpose of playing spy, that they'll shoot without warning—and shoot to kill!"

"Do you really think that?" asked Price, growing grave, as he could be on occasion. "You're not simply trying to scare me off my feed?"

"You remember what that girl told us?"

"Of course."

"You haven't forgotten what we heard and saw, a little later?"

"I'll rattle it off, from start to finish, if you'll let up on such fool' questions," impatiently muttered Price.

"I wanted to make you understand just what it means to be taken for revenue spies by men like these Ozark Hillers," was the grave retort. "If I have done that, then you'd ought to guess why I was so taken aback by smelling that—it does come from a running still!"

"Didn't I say as much, first off? And if the still is running, it's got men handy to see that it don't run clean off the track. So—"

"Go ahead—the faster the better!" angrily growled Kendrick, fairly losing his patience. "I'd rather be killed by a bullet than die a lingering death under your fool' tongue!"

"That's enough, old fellow. I'm sober as a judge from this on. And now tell me something about these Hillers of yours: *what are they?*"

Kendrick was mollified by that abrupt change of tone and manner, for past experience told him Owen Price could be reasonable enough when he fairly realized the necessity for gravity.

"They're moonshiners, almost to a man, and consequently just as bitterly opposed to the Government now as they were during the war, when all were guerrillas or bushwhackers save those regularly enlisted in the Confederate service."

"A sweet-scented lot, truly!"

"They fought for the side they held was right—fought the best they knew how, remember. I'm not blaming them for *that*. I'm not even saying that they are entirely wrong *now*, from their point of view."

"Which is?"

"They find it simply impossible to live and rear their families on what they raise on their rocky, unproductive farms. They must have a little money, now and then. They live too far from a market to haul their grain, even if they all owned teams, which is far from being the case. So they do as their forefathers did before them: turn it into poor whisky, which is so much smaller in bulk that transportation is at least possible."

"There's big money in whisky for others, who pay the tax: why not for your Hillers?"

"Because they are too poor to set up a regular distillery, or to work on a scale extensive enough to pay a profit after taking out a Government license: don't you see?"

"That you are not arguing on their side for the first time," with a short, dry laugh.

"Because I've given the matter a good deal of thought, and have lived long enough among these men to see that they have a case to present, as well as those who denounce them wholesale as lawless outlaws."

"All of which is interesting enough, but how does it touch *our* case? Those fellows can't prove that we're spies."

"That's not the question. Can we prove we're not revenue scouts?"

"Of course we can, with half a show!"

"Which is just what they'll never grant us, if what I suspect be true: if this is part of a cavern in the other end of which a secret still has been set up."

"Well, I must confess it isn't a particularly cheerful picture you have drawn, old fellow, but since there is no going back—"

"I am going back," firmly interposed Kendrick, opening his lantern and striking a match. "We were idiots for coming this far, blindly. We should never have left the place where we entered, until every means of opening a passage had been exhausted."

"But the rock—"

"I know all that, but in falling it splintered the sides of the hole. Maybe we can pick our way through. It is at least a *chance*, and there is only *sure death* ahead of us if we keep on as we started."

By this time he had lighted the lantern, though with considerable difficulty, which significant fact he did not fully realize in his present state of uneasiness.

Rising to his feet, Kendrick led the way back the short distance they had covered after crossing the river by that precarious trail, but though less than a minute was thus consumed, he was forced to pause at the brink to pick at the wick of his bull's-eye, the light had grown so very dim. Then—

"Owen Price, the light is played out!"

"You don't mean it!" cried the other, in startled tones.

For answer, Kendrick held out the lantern. The feeble flame vanished, leaving only a dully glowing coal.

"That *does* settle it!" doggedly spoke Price, turning sharply on his heel, his back to the river.

brink. "I'll never try that crawl in the dark, moonshiners or no moonshiners, spy or no spy!"

Kendrick was silent, staring at the little coal until it died completely away, feeling almost as though his own spark of life was vanishing at the same time.

He knew that Owen Price was right. It would be little less than committing suicide to attempt that perilous passage in the dark. The chances were hardly one in a thousand of their performing the feat in safety. Yet—

"It's just as sure death the other way!" he uttered, hoarsely.

"They'll furnish a light for us to die by, anyway," recklessly laughed Owen, but with an undercurrent of resolution which Kendrick knew no arguments he might offer could shake. "And with us on the lookout for snags, they can't make us croak so sudden that we'll not have time to leave 'em a keepsake or two."

"Then you mean—"

"To follow my nose for lack of a more brilliant leader," was the prompt response. "It isn't so mighty as some, but it's a heap sight better than no headlight at all. Catch hold, if you're afraid of going astray, Robin."

As he spoke, Owen thrust one end of a stout strap into Kendrick's hand, keeping hold of the other himself, then moving guardedly away from the river, the murmur of which furnished a tolerable guide for a short distance.

Kendrick offered no objections, for as yet he could suggest nothing better. Since it was out of the question to even think of crossing back over the river, there was only one course they could follow, at least until the cavern should divide or a side passage branch off.

To remain idle was unbearable. True, they had a small quantity of food, since neither had given a thought to eating since entering that dismal refuge. But water was lacking, and eating would only add to the thirst which each man was already feeling with some acuteness.

It was blind groping, at the best, since they decided to reserve their few remaining matches until more urgently required. But Owen felt each foot of the ground before him, showing such cool wariness that Kendrick had no excuse for depriving him of the lead, even had he felt so inclined.

For fully half an hour this blind progress was maintained, and by the expiration of that time, neither could longer doubt their being in a retreat where whisky was being manufactured. The peculiar scent could no longer be mistaken for aught else, and feeling confident that they were steadily drawing closer to the spot where—in all human probability—their fate would be quickly decided, once for all, they grew still more guarded in their movements.

"Keep one point religiously in mind, Owen," guardedly whispered Kendrick, during one of their brief pauses to listen. "No matter what the temptation, not a shot must be fired on our side, unless at the very last extremity!"

"But—must we meekly stand and let 'em rub it in?"

"If a drop of blood is shed by either of us, they'll kill us with as little mercy as they'd show a wolf! As much courage as you like, but not a shot—remember!"

Within ten minutes after this warning was delivered, the two men paused, catching the low murmur of human voices, apparently coming from no great distance ahead, though as yet no signs of a light greeted their aching eyes.

The reason for this was quickly understood, when they came to an abrupt elbow (or side passage, as it afterward proved to be) in the cave, around which came the dull glow of a fire.

Slowly, silently, every muscle under careful control, the chums crept around that turn, eagerly scanning the dusky figures now brought into view.

Among others they both recognized the gaunt, bony, powerful figure of the man who had kept Perry Sparks from treacherously plunging a knife into the heart of their drugged guide: Garl Orton.

He was squatting on a stone, his elbows resting on his bent knees, one hand supporting the bowl of a corn-cob pipe. Not far to one side burned a few dry sticks, though the fire was hardly large enough to be serviceable as a means of giving heat or light to the rough-clad Hillers there congregated.

Among their number was Dick Branch, and his voice was the one which the chums first clearly distinguished.

"Wal, I ain't givin' it up so dug-gun easy, ye want to know! Ef the cussed spies is smart enough fer to skip 'thout leavin' a trail o' the bigness sech as a common man kin foller it, they ain't smart enough fer to git out o' the Ozarks 'thout so much as techin' hoof to ground or rock. An when them houn' dogs o' Mossback's gits the fu'st scent, be mighty sure they'll show us whar to look fer the last one!"

There was a grim pause, during which Dick Branch gazed defiantly about him, like one who has encountered unexpected opposition to that part of his argument delivered before the chums came within hearing.

Garl Orton leaned over to one side and picked up some soft substance, silently rolling it between

his horny palms until it took on a round, ball-like shape.

"An' it's clean time Perry Sparks was gittin' hyar with the pups, I'm thinkin'," added Dick Branch, as no one else spoke promptly.

"Ruther tough, huntin' whites 'ith houn's, like niggers!" slowly uttered Thomas Haller.

Dick Branch turned upon him with an ugly snarl, but Garl Orton quickly thrust his ball into the fire, then, as it blazed up brilliantly, he hurled it swiftly through the air. It fell beyond the two refugees, plainly revealing them to all eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

PERRY SPARKS SECURES AN ALLY.

THERE was a wolfish look about his face as Perry Sparks uttered those words; threat and vow combined. His strong teeth showed a white line through the fringe of jetty hair with which his lips were shaded; lips naturally red and full, but looking more so than ordinarily just now, thanks to the force which indignation had lent the little hand of Mercy Winston.

"Something, I know; but what?" he added, still scowling blackly as he seemed loth to turn away from that spot, the last from which he could gain a clear view of the Winston home.

Only those bending pillars of blue smoke gave sure evidence that human life was yonder. Neither Jerome Winston, nor his daughter Mercy, were visible. Yet, as he glared savagely back at their home, Perry Sparks was rapidly recalling all that had taken place during his brief visit.

And thus rapidly reviewing all that he had said, prior to that strange cry and start given by the old soldier, he could only reach the same conclusion as before.

"It was that name—the name of Kendrick, or, possibly, Owen Price—but, why? His face looked like that of a dead man! Like that of Jim Hart when I saw him drop dead with a bullet through his heart!"

The young mountaineer turned away, letting the mass of vines drop to shut off the view of the buildings across the gentle depression.

There was a slight shiver at that remembered resemblance, as though the subject was a particularly disagreeable one, and he made his way through the woods at a brisk pace for some little distance.

He had said nothing to Jerome Winston about the hounds, and had beaten his retreat without giving them another thought, though getting them into his possession had been his sole object in taking that toilsome trip through the night.

Even now he had no room in his busy brain for thoughts that way. He was stubbornly striving to solve that enigma; why had Jerome Winston betrayed such extraordinary agitation at the mention of Robert Kendrick's name?

What was Kendrick to him? What connection could there possibly be between those two, so widely separated in age, in position, in every external trait and seeming?

"He looked as though I had stuck a red hot knife right into his heart! He looked as though he was dying! What for? If I only knew!"

He quelled his savage passions as best he could, trying to recall all he had ever heard concerning the past life of the general. But that was not much, and when sifted down, offered nothing by which that strange agitation could be plausibly explained.

He had been a soldier in the Confederate service, fighting hard from start to finish; but so had a score of others in that neighborhood.

He had come to this region, his sole companion a little girl: one hardly more than an infant. He put up a little log cabin—the same now occupied by the negro servants—and settled down to a lonely, reserved life.

It was nearly a year later that he took Moses Hunter to live with them: a raw, awkward youth who had taken his baptism of fire in a band of guerrillas, the majority of them friends and neighbors to his father. Father and son drifted into the regular service, and Thomas Hunter died from a bullet which would otherwise have slain his captain, Winston. Moses was wounded in the same battle, and it was not until some time after peace was declared that he and his old captain met, there in the Ozarks.

From that day to this, not one point could be scored against Jerome Winston, though Perry Sparks tried his best to recall something to his discredit, some word or deed which could afford him even the shadow of a clue to that strange excitement.

"Yet it's there! He's done something that makes him fear the name—or the person—which?"

Then he gave a start, his scowl vanished for the moment, his sullen eyes winning a bright glow as he struck his clinched hands heavily together.

"The old man! What was it he said: something about—that he had a ring in the general's nose, whenever he saw fit to use it! He wasn't drunk. He didn't seem to be bragging, just to hear himself talk. Maybe—I'll do it, for luck!"

The memory seemed a spur sufficient to make his limbs forget their weariness, and for a mile or more the mountaineer made rapid progress, heading toward the lower ground, where his

father owned a comfortable house and fairly productive plantation.

This brisk exercise, or his having a fairly definite end in view, did much to calm his vicious anger, and when he caught sight of a man on horseback picking his way up the narrow valley lying just ahead of him, the recognition which followed helped materially to alter the determination which he had formed when first thinking of his father.

Uttering a sharp halloo, and swinging his hat as a further token of his wish for a meeting, Perry Sparks swiftly descended into the valley, where the horseman was awaiting his coming.

Uriah Sparks—for, curiously enough, this horseman was the young mountaineer's father—was apparently three-score years of age, judging from his white hair, his wrinkled, parchment-like skin, and his bent form; but, he was active enough, wiry and quick of motion. And those who knew him best said he was strong as a panther, and quick to strike as a rattlesnake in August.

"I want your horse for a bit, father," hurriedly said Perry, without wasting time in a more respectful salutation.

"So do I want it, and having possession, I reckon my wants are just a bit more likely to be gratified than yours, in this case," retorted the elder Sparks, with a dry, disagreeable chuckle.

"I want it to go home after the hound. The devil's broke loose over Orton's way—a couple of revenue spies—"

"You don't mean it, boy?" ejaculated Uriah Sparks, his face turning yellow than usual, his black eyes glittering like those of a snake as they keenly scanned the face of his son. "They couldn't have got here so soon!"

"Who couldn't? What do you mean, father?" demanded Perry, his suspicions awakened in turn.

"I was going over to the still, to warn Orton that word came from—you know where—to keep all eyes open: that there was trouble brewing, and dangerous eyes might be expected soon. Now—what did *you* mean? Who told you spies were near? Out with it, in a word!"

"I don't need any one to tell me what I found out of my own knowledge," curtly retorted the younger man. Mossback Mose guided a couple of fellows up here, they pretending to be simply city chaps out on a general hunting expedition, for sport. One of them, Owen Price as he calls himself, I know to be a Secret Service official, from the East, while the other, Robert Kendrick—"

"What? Say that again!" sharply ejaculated Uriah Sparks.

His son stared with wide eyes, for he had once more produced strong agitation by simply pronouncing that name. Uriah Sparks shrunk back in the saddle, crouching like one dodging a heavy blow. His face turned ghastly pale, his eyes glittered vividly, and the bony hand that shot toward his bosom as though seeking a weapon, trembled like a leaf.

His agitation at hearing that name was almost as great as that which had so amazed the young mountaineer in the case of Jerome Winston, differing only in nature. For where the old soldier seemed stunned, this man was put on the alert: where Winston was agonized, Sparks seemed fully as angry as he was scared.

"Robert Kendrick was the name I spoke, father," slowly repeated Perry, keenly watching the effect of his words. "And only a short time ago I nearly scared old Winston into a fit by uttering that same name in his presence!"

"The general? You spoke that name—curse you!" shaking a clinched fist at his son, his wrinkled visage fairly convulsed with furious passion. "How dared you! What do you know—Perry, son?"

The change was magic. All agitation was gone. That scowl vanished, leaving no trace behind it. And Uriah Sparks spoke as blandly as he smiled an accompaniment.

"Yes, sir," mechanically muttered the bewildered young man.

"I let my tongue run away with me, just now. I apologize. Now, having made the amends due one gentleman from another, please tell me something more about these alleged spies of yours: who are they? Where are they? In one word, all you know about the matter."

"But—who is Kendrick? And why did you—"

"Later, son. I'm waiting for my questions to be answered, please bear in mind," blandly smiled Uriah Sparks.

Past experience warned Perry that when his father was in that mood, nothing short of blind obedience would be tolerated by him, and reckless though he had grown of late years, the young mountaineer stood in actual awe of that, his only living parent.

Though he was fairly ablaze with curiosity, he knew that his only hope of learning the secret connected with Kendrick, lay in satisfying his father, and as briefly as possible, without obscuring the story, he sketched the events of the past night.

He stuck to the same story he had told General Winston, blending lies with truth, after a fashion that seemed to thoroughly deceive that keen-eyed, shrewd-witted planter.

Uriah Sparks listened without a word of comment, or wasting time in asking questions. He drew a long breath as Perry concluded, nodding his head briskly, like one well content.

"Leave the spies, with the boys on their track, my son, and pass on to General Winston. How came you to pay him a visit? And in just what manner did he receive your mention of that—did you say *Robert*, or *Robin*?"

"Robert Kendrick, I said; I only heard him called Rob, or Robin."

"Robert, in all probability, since the others are diminutives fitting that name. And the general?"

Passing over his interview with Mercy, Perry gave a fairly accurate description of what transpired in the log home, Uriah listening with a smile, but plainly weighing each word spoken.

"And the general was moved by hearing that name, eh?" with a low, oily chuckle, coming from deep down in his throat, without in the least disturbing that fixed smile. "And you thought—*what*, my son?"

"That he had some strong reason for fearing either the name or the one who owns it! And you—father, you know his secret. Share it with me, and if it can help me win Mercy Winston to wife, I'll serve you like a nigger the rest of my life!"

"But I thought you wanted to borrow my nag to go after the pup?"

"I did, but—"

"Let the spies run a little longer, my lad!" laughed Sparks, drawing his bony figure erect, tossing back his long, silvery locks. "The Hillers are on their track, and their noses are keen as that of the best bloodhound in the Ozarks! Let them go—and we'll make a neighborly call this beautiful morning!"

"Not on—what do you mean, father?"

"That I am going to call on General Winston."

"But—you have never been near him before, and—"

Uriah Sparks laughed softly, lightly, with an airy wave of the hand.

"There must always be a first time, my son, and if the two families are destined to be allied by marriage, such a call is nothing more than common politeness demands. Surely it is time the two heads of the houses formed an acquaintance?"

"Then, with another abrupt change of tone and manner, he asked:

"Will you consent to make Mercy Winston your lawful wife, son?"

"I'd give my right hand for the privilege!"

"Even without an explanation of that agitation? If her father's hand should be proven—*red*?"

"Yes!" almost fiercely. "Even if her father was Satan himself!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ENTANGLED IN THE MESHES.

JEROME WINSTON was seated alone in his small, but cozy room at home, an elbow resting on his desk, his eyes covered with that hand, buried in deep and painful thought.

A couple of hours had passed since he drove Perry Sparks from beneath his roof, in stern, almost fierce anger. That rage had had time to die out; not so the bitter memories conjured up by the name those bruised lips had pronounced.

Mr. Winston had soothed his daughter's fears, after some trouble, and almost convinced her that nothing serious was the matter: that his agitation had been caused by a passing twinge of rheumatic pain near his heart, born of indignation at the insolent manner displayed by Perry Sparks.

And now, having given his consent to Mercy, under the escort of Uncle Harvey, the faithful negro man, going over to pay Ruth Orton a flying visit, to learn what, if any, truth there was in Perry Sparks's assertion that Moses Hunter had returned from St. Louis, Jerome Winston gave himself over to brooding thoughts of the dark and troubled past.

He had no fears of interruption, since only Aunt Chloe remained on the place, besides himself, and feeling thus secure, he yielded without reserve to his dark despair.

If he had sinned in those long-departed days, he was paying the full penalty now. His bowed form shivered. More than once he groaned aloud, like one suffering intense agony.

It was just after one of these involuntary outbursts of grief or remorse, that a sharp rapping sound without his room, startled him. He lifted his head quickly, but saw no one. And naturally supposing that the noise was made by good Aunt Chloe, he called out:

"I did not call, Chloe. I want nothing—thanks."

A dry, hacking cough made answer, and a few moments later, the figure of a man appeared at the partly open door, bowing profoundly, holding his hat in his hand, saying blandly:

"Begging your pardon, general, for taking the liberty, but—as no one answered my knock, I ventured—"

Jerome Winston rose from his seat, bowing a little stiffly as he said:

"My servants are out, and I misinterpreted your signal. How can I serve you, sir?"

"You are General Jerome Winston, I believe?"

"I was a colonel in the service, yes."

"Then the Hillers recognized your real merits better than the confederacy did, Jerry!" laughed the other, turning his face so that the clear light from the open window fell fairly across his features. "Is your memory at fault, Jerry, or has your promotion to such an elevated rank made you too proud to recognize an old chum?"

Jerome Winston gave a gasp, shrinking back almost as he had done when the son of this man pronounced the name of Robert Kendrick.

"Dexter Cane! Alive—and here?" he gasped, huskily, brushing a trembling hand across his eyes like one seeking to dispel a mist.

"Dexter Cane, in the olden time, yes," bowed his visitor, smiling more blandly than before. "Alive? Yes. Here? Most assuredly! And why not, since the day was when Jerry Winston called Dexter Cane his best, truest, only faithful friend."

"But—I thought you were dead!"

"So Dexter Cane is dead, but the gentleman who once graced that honorable title is now—Uriah Sparks, at your service, general."

"Uriah—not the father of Perry Sparks?"

"Your neighbor for many years, general, though this sometimes convenient habit of altering names has worked against our meeting sooner," laughed Sparks, dropping his hat on the desk in order to clasp the unsteady hand of his startled host with both of his own. "Better late than never, eh, Jerry? And still in time to renew old ties by forming new ones. Eh?"

Still seeming too greatly shaken to find speech easy, Winston returned that clasp, then placed a seat for his visitor, sinking back into his armchair with a sigh that was little better than a gasp.

Uriah Sparks watched him closely, taking note of his extreme weakness. His crafty face took on an expression of shocked sympathy, but the malicious sparkle in his close-set eyes belied his face.

"Growing old—old and feeble, both of us, Jerry!" he breathed, with a soft sigh. "All these weary years have not crept by without leaving their accumulating weight; your shoulders are bent, as well as my own, old friend!"

"I can hardly complain of my health, as a rule, Dexter—"

"Uriah, now, Jerry! Once Dexter, just as you were once—"

"Not that old name!" sharply interposed the general, a flush leaping into his face.

"We are alone together, old friend, but if you say so, let that old name rest—for the present," putting a far from agreeable emphasis on the last words.

Something in his tones seemed to sting his host, for he braced up remarkably, something of the old fire kindling in his dark eyes.

"Did I understand you to say that Perry Sparks is your son, sir?"

"He passes for such, at all events, general," with a short laugh. "I know what you are about to say, so please spare your breath—and my ears. I met the young rascal, a bit ago, and he told me of his rank folly. Only for that confession, I'm not quite sure I should have ventured on this call."

"Why have you kept away? Why have you let me think you were dead these many years? I can't understand it!" half-frowned Winston.

"Are you really in ignorance of all that took place at St. Louis after— I simply intended saying after your last message from me, Gordon," smoothly smiled Sparks, briefly checked by that out-flung hand.

"I heard nothing," muttered Winston, his eyes lowering, his head drooping to a trembling palm. "I went back to my regiment and sought death wherever it was to be found—by others! I wanted to forget, and I knew that such forgetfulness as I wished for, could be found only in the grave!"

There was a brief interval of silence after that gloomy outburst, during which Uriah Sparks critically scanned that bowed, broken form. There was a malicious devil in his eyes which might have been dangerous to their owner, had Jerome Winston caught and fully understood its meaning.

But the time had come when all masks were to be cast aside, and believing that he held this old man wholly at his mercy, Uriah Sparks could afford to run some slight risks.

"You wondered why I have kept so long in hiding—why I have changed my name, Gordon?" he presently asked, vailing the evil light in his eyes and speaking in low, almost melancholy tones.

"I did marvel—my wonder is greater still why you could live so long in the same neighborhood with me, yet never let me hear a word from my old-time friend," said Winston, lifting his face, his voice trembling with strong emotion.

"I'll come to that later, Gordon. As for my fleeing from St. Louis in disguise and under another name, I had to do it!"

"Why?"

"Because I was ruined by my faith in an old friend, Gordon."

"Not—not on account of what you did for me?"

"Yes, simply and solely because I fought your battles the best I knew how, Gordon Kendrick!"

"Not—Gordon Kendrick is dead!" gasped the general, flinching as from a heavy blow.

"He was, rather, until you betrayed the fact that he still lives, this very morning," laughed Sparks, his tone and manner changing. "If you wanted the ugly secret kept close, why did you so foolishly betray such powerful emotion when you heard the name of—"

"Silence, Dexter Cane!" sternly cried the general, drawing his still vigorous frame erect, his black eyes flashing vividly.

"I've waited a good many years for the right time to come, dear fellow," purred Sparks, never flinching from that frown. "It has come now. I am here to show you how much I have suffered on your account, and you are here to listen to all I see fit to say, sir!"

"I am willing to listen, so long as you don't—"

"So long as I permit you to rule in every respect? That was the way matters ran between us in the old days, Gordon Kendrick, but I've learned wisdom through bitter experience of later years."

"What is it you wish to gain by this harsh treatment, sir? Why have you altered so much—so much for the worse? I once believed you were my friend; best, most faithful a miserable wretch ever was blessed with in time of sorest need. But now—you act as though I was your bitterest, most hated enemy!"

"Whether we remain friends, or whether we turn bitter enemies, depends solely on yourself, sir. In just what respect, I'll make clear to you in a few minutes. First—about my change of name."

"You can't have forgotten how firmly I stood by you in your days of trouble, and—"

"I thank you now, even as I thanked you then, my old friend."

He extended an unsteady hand, but Uriah Sparks shook his head in refusal. Not yet, that motion said: time enough when all was made clear between them.

"I stood up for you through thick and thin, as I said before. I stood at your side when you killed—"

"Don't—let the past sleep!" gasped Winston, shivering, his face sinking into his hands.

"When you killed your half-brother, Carroll Kendrick," pitilessly persisted Sparks. "I covered your flight after he fell, fairly riddled by your bullets. I covered your escape from the lines—for I would not have your name disgraced by seeing you perish as a spy, caught in disguise inside the enemy's lines."

"I was no spy. I only went there to avenge—to kill that vile traitor!" flashed Winston, once more lifting his head, his eyes blazing up anew.

"Still, you were there in disguise," persisted Sparks. "And the friends of Carroll Kendrick made use of that fact, later, to my final ruin! From that day I was constantly fighting for you; fighting harder for my old friend and his last requests, than I could fight for myself when their batteries were all turned upon me. Then—ruined in purse and disgraced in name—convicted of being a rebel spy, among other things, thanks to my backing you, a Confederate officer!"

"I fought until longer fighting meant the halter, then I fled, as you had fled, seeking safety inside the Confederacy."

"Why did you not seek me out?"

"Why did you take such pains to cover all traces by which that quest might succeed?" bitterly retorted Sparks, casting aside even that thin pretense of amity. "I did search for you! I spent a full year trying to find you, then concluded that you must have found the death you said you were seeking—on some battlefield!"

"If I had only known!"

"Would you have acted differently?"

"You can ask that—of me, for whom you sacrificed so much?"

"Why not, when only a few minutes ago you shrunk from me as from a dreaded ghost?" dryly laughed Uriah Sparks.

"I thought—I felt you *must* be a ghost!" muttered Winston, wearily, looking weak and sick from such a terrible strain. "I was brooding over the past, brought back by that name—*whose* name?" with poorly suppressed eagerness, not unmingled with dread. "Not—not my son's?"

"Not your son's name. The name of Carroll Kendrick's son!"

Winston sunk back in his seat, groaning bitterly, the picture of wretchedness and grief. Uriah Sparks watched him gloatingly, no longer seeking to disguise the vicious enmity which he surely felt for this sadly broken-down man. And then he laughed, maliciously:

"Strange, isn't it, how the past will come up: how history will repeat itself? Years ago it was you and Carroll, arrayed against each other because of a fair woman's smiles. Now it's Carroll's son and—your noble boy!"

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHER AND SON.

JEROME WINSTON'S lips parted, but only to utter an inarticulate gasp. Drops of sweat stood out like pearly beads on his forehead, and his eyes held a wild, hunted, yet dazed look that baffled description.

Uriah Sparks grinned maliciously at the old soldier whom he had tangled in his evil meshes, plainly enjoying the torture his repeated stabs were causing. And like one who feels himself in a measure defrauded by only a partial payment justly his due, he once more rung the changes on that coincidence:

"Carroll and Gordon, in the old war days. Robert and Robin in our times of piping peace! It ended in bloodshed and flight, then. Now—what will be the outcome, old friend?"

"My boy—my son—where is he?" gasped Winston, making a brave effort to overcome his powerful emotions, but with poor success.

"Give me your hand," said Uriah Sparks, with another of his odd, abrupt transformations, looking owlish in his gravity as he reached a yellow paw across the desk between them.

Winston hesitated, more through not fully understanding that request than aught else, however; but, when it was repeated, he complied.

"So!" nodded Sparks, cocking his head a little to one side, as though listening to the heart-throbs which his fingers were measuring. "Rest your arm on the desk. Now—don't talk!"

His gravity increased to such an extent that a stranger seeing the couple for the first time, would surely have taken Uriah Sparks for some learned physician, and Jerome Winston for a highly valued patient, whose continued existence hung by a silken thread.

"Bad—decidedly bad, my dear general!" muttered Sparks, shaking his head slowly as he reluctantly removed his fingers. "Too quick by half. Irregular—heart complications, or I know nothing of—"

"It is nothing," interrupted Winston, a feeling of irritation coming to the surface as he began to realize how maliciously this unlooked-for visitor was playing with his most sacred feelings. "I am well enough. 'Tis nothing but suspense, added to the shock of—of having the dead past revived without warning!"

"Precisely, my dear general," purred Sparks, bowing again until his head almost touched the top of the desk between them. "Nothing but a shock, as you say. But—it's precisely these little unlooked-for shocks that make men drop in their tracks. It's just that way many a good man's best friends first find out that his heart was out of fix. And so—we'll come at the grand climax gradually and by degrees, with your kind permission."

"You spoke of my son: where is he now?" "I spoke of your half-brother's son first. Have you no questions to ask about him, general?" sneered Sparks.

Once more the old soldier shrunk back, shivering like one receiving a bitter blow, which he can neither return in kind, nor guard against.

"You are pitiless—merciless as the grave!" he muttered, his tones hardly articulate. "Why have you changed so utterly? What willful wrong—how have I deserved such treatment at your hands?"

"Haven't I given you reasons enough already, Gordon Kendrick?" snarled his tormentor, curling those thin lips back until his teeth—discolored, broken, uncared for remnants—were laid bare. "My fortune confiscated! My home broken up! My good name plastered over with obloquy! My stainless past forgotten by all who were once my firm and fast friends, who only remember the monument set up over that fair record; who only see the words upon it—spy, traitor, killer of—"

"Only so much do I owe you, Gordon Kendrick," he laughed, changing from intense passion to cold, sneering hatred as he left that self-describing epitaph incomplete. "Only so much—on the face of our accounts, that is! I've still another score against you, which I'll present in good time."

General Winston sat motionless in his arm-chair, gazing into that yellowish, parchment-like visage opposite. His strange agitation had subsided, or worn itself out. Just now he seemed incapable of feeling aught beside a certain dull, vague wonder.

What had changed this man whom he had once called his friend? Who had rendered him the greatest of service when all the rest of mankind seemed arrayed against him? Or—was this indeed the Dexter Cane of those old war-times? Was it not a changeling—an evil imp who had stolen face, voice, name, memory?

"I was an ass, then, in more respects than one," softly confessed Uriah Sparks, slipping down in his chair until he looked the picture of lazy comfort, his elbows on the arms, his hands lifted and finger-tips joined, forming a gothic arch beneath which his half-closed eyes, keen and sharp as needle-points, could flash their glances into the pale, drawn countenance of his host. "I bore your burdens even more willingly than I bore my own, for one thing. And—ass-like—I took blows and curses for my pay, too!"

"Not from me, Dexter Cane," muttered Winston.

"No. Not from you, Gordon Kendrick. I don't think I could have taken either a blow or a curse from you—even in those days!"

"Did you hate me so bitterly, then?" asked Winston, in dull, sleepy curiosity, as it seemed from voice and look. "I thought you—loved me in those days!"

"By my works I proved my love, didn't I?" laughed Sparks, harshly. "Don't excite yourself by asking questions, general, or I'll never cool you off enough to hear all I have to reveal. I'm talking solely for your sake, please bear in mind. Can you doubt that? Wouldn't I be more than blind, and worse than an ass, to rake up so many bitter memories on any less urgent necessity?"

"My boy—tell me what you meant by—what did you mean, Dexter Cane?" tremblingly demanded the old soldier. "Are you bent on driving me crazy, man?"

"I came here to tell you about your noble son, Gordon. I will tell you all even such an adoring father could wish to hear; but after my own fashion. If you are not willing to wait for that, then—shall I bid you good-day, and call again when you have more leisure?"

"Go on," muttered Winston, sinking back into his chair, closing his eyes wearily. "Only—spare me as much as you can. We were once friends—once—friends!"

"I've often caught myself wondering whether you ever took the trouble to count up all that friendship cost me, Gordon! I doubt it, seriously, though you must have had oceans of spare time for thought, since settling down here, as ruler of the Ozarks! While I—but you look as though you thought I was imposing on good nature, Gordon!"

"I am trying to be patient, Dexter Cane."

"And I am preparing to reward that patience, dear Kendrick," that arch-rascal chuckled, his little eyes glittering like those of a vicious snake from cover of his arched hands. "I am collecting my thoughts, and putting them in regular order, so that there need be no more breaks, no awkward hitches, when once I begin to tell you about your gallant boy, Gordon."

"Then—he is still living?" huskily faltered the old soldier.

"Still living, Gordon. Alive and well, strong and handsome as—but we'll keep on hoping that you may soon judge for yourself."

"Does he know—have you told him who—who I am?"

With strange, almost pitiful eagerness, blended with a shrinking reluctance, those words were forced from his lips. And Uriah Sparks grinned maliciously as he watched and listened, for he alone could know what positive torture that wretched man was suffering just then.

"I have not told him just what you are—as yet," he slowly replied, with an ugly emphasis which caused Winston to shiver anew. "But once more—let me take my own gait, or I'll balk once for all!"

"To go back to the beginning: you can hardly have forgotten your last injunction to me, your sole friend and confidant, when you were forced to flee from town, directly after you—after that unfortunate accident in front of the Planters?"

"No. I remember. I had to trust you, for I had no one else."

"And I did my level best to perform the duty you left me, Gordon Kendrick! Ay! though that trying brought me to ruin—to the very shadow of the gallows! And, later, to the verge of starvation!"

"I did not know. I could not divine—"

"Nor do I mean to extort your sympathy by complaining, at this late hour. All I wish is to let you see that my failure to perfectly carry out your last instructions was owing to no actual fault of my good will. I surely did all that any one man could do!"

"You left your undying curse to your wife—"

"Name her not, if you ever loved me, Dexter Cane!"

"And your property to your son, through me. On its face, I had paid you full value. It was risky on your part, but what other course could you take? Already there was talk of confiscation, and after your shooting—after that sad accident—little clemency would be shown to you or yours. And so—I accepted that sacred trust!"

"I did what I could to make it good. I fought every inch of the way. For I stood alone in those stormy days: one man against an army of men. And against at least—one woman!"

Again Jerome Winston shivered sharply, but he clinched his teeth and smothered the low cry that rose in his throat. This protracted torture was well-nigh killing him. Let it end as soon as might be.

"And that one woman, physically weak and frail, but a giantess in will and determination, Gordon! That woman did more than all the rest combined to bring about my defeat and ruin!"

"For that is what it amounted to, in the end. They contested my claims, charging collusion and fraud. They charged me with having helped you, a Confederate spy and assassin, into and out of the city while the place was under strict military rule. I was hounded from civil court

to military guard-house. I was painted a monster of—but why dilate? In a single word—I was driven to bloodshed!"

"That ended my fight, of course. I was branded as a murderer; even while the whole city knew that I was first assaulted, and struck only to save my own life. If I was so guilty, why was I permitted to escape? Why was I not arrested at once as a murderer? Why was I given time—one whole day and night—enough to steal away your son, and with him escape from town?"

"You stole—my boy?" gasped Winston agitatedly.

"Because I swore to you that I would never desert him. Because you made me take an oath never to resign him to the care of your—of the woman who had caused all your misery. And even though each hour increased my own peril, I waited and watched until that chance came my way. And with your son in my possession, I set out in search of you, his father, my friend."

"And I—oh, why did you not find me?" groaned the wretched man.

"Ten thousand times I asked myself that question, before I would admit what seemed at last to be the truth: that you meant never to be found, Gordon Kendrick! That you were hiding from me, even closer than you were hiding from the friends who had sworn to bitterly avenge the killing of Carroll Kendrick!"

"I did not—as Heaven hears me! I thought—I felt that you were rich, free, able as you were willing to raise my boy as your own, in blissful ignorance of the awful shadow which had covered his infant days."

"Instead of that, I was at the point of starvation. For months and even years, I lived from hand-to-mouth, starving myself to feed your child, searching in vain for his father, my friend. Then—even my faith failed me, and I grew soured and suspicious. From loving, I came to hating. From revering your memory, I fell to cursing your very name. And had I met you then, my greeting would have come from pistol or from knife-point!"

"But—you did not try to punish me through—my boy?"

Uriah Sparks made no immediate reply in words, but rising from his chair he passed over to the open window, crooking a finger in his mouth and blowing a sharp whistle. Like its echo came an answer, and with a grim, hard smile playing about his thin lips, he turned toward the door.

Ten seconds later Perry Sparks showed himself at the threshold.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PUTTING ON THE SCREWS.

GENERAL WINSTON started to his feet with an ejaculation of mingled surprise and indignation as he recognized that darkly handsome face. He flung out one hand as though to repeat that stern dismissal, but the words froze on his lips as Uriah Sparks began to speak;

"Thanks for your prompt response, my dear boy. The general expressed an urgent wish to meet his—Gordon," turning swiftly, with bow and gesture, "this is the boy you wished to see: Robin Kendrick, this is your real father!"

It would be hard to say which was the most thoroughly taken aback by this totally unexpected introduction.

General Winston uttered a choking cry, shrinking back, throwing up a hand as though to guard against a cruel blow. He fell, rather than sat down in his chair, trembling strangely as he stared at that athletic figure and handsome face.

Perry Sparks seemed fully as much astounded by those words, falling from the lips of the man whom he had never once doubted was his own father; but there was a sentiment even more powerful than surprise which flashed into his eyes and contracted his brows.

"But—Mercy!" he stammered, his hands clinching angrily.

Uriah Sparks laughed softly, rubbing his skinny hands together until they gave forth a sound like the grating of sandpaper.

"There's more money in Mercy as a sister than as a bride, my dear boy. But—all right! The general will never cross his only son and heir in his very first wish. So," turning abruptly toward the old soldier, who was still benumbed by that totally unexpected shock, "when shall I speak to the parson, and invite the wedding guests, dear man?"

Jerome Winston started like one receiving an electrical shock, his haggard face flushing hotly, his eyes glowing, his voice harsh and stern as he cried aloud:

"Never! that coward is no son of mine!"

"Softly, my dear general," chuckled the arch-villain, every look and motion betraying the fact that he knew himself master of the situation. "Curb your angry passions, I beg of you! Take warning by the sad past, and don't permit yourself to say words which no gentleman can swallow again without losing his self-respect."

"I have said it; that cowardly knave is no son of mine!"

"At all events, he is the undisputed son of your wife, Gordon Kendrick!" sharply retorted

Sparks, his smile vanishing in a frown. "Knowing so much, will you still deny being his father?"

It was a cruel, cowardly blow, and one which, had Jerome Winston been anything like the man he had been before those repeated shocks so terribly unnerved him, would almost surely have cost the villain his life before the sounds had fairly died out of his lips.

But Uriah Sparks had fully counted the cost, and while standing prepared to defend himself, he believed that his words would be quite sufficient; and he was right.

The sorely tortured man cowered lower in his chair, hiding his haggard face, trembling like a leaf, never more fully realizing his utter helplessness than in those minutes of agony.

If he had sinned in the past, surely he was paying full penalty now. Death itself could not be a more bitter atonement.

Perry Sparks moved uneasily, but the man whom he had always believed his own father flashed an imperious look into that discontented face, pointing to a chair. He said never a word, but the young mountaineer dare not rebel against that silent command. He sat down, biting his bruised lips until they bled again.

There was no pretense of amity in face or manner as Uriah Sparks resumed his own seat, facing his trembling victim across that low desk. He seemed cold as ice, hard as steel, pitiless as fate itself.

"Why have I kept my secret so carefully, even from the boy I've reared as my own flesh and blood, whom I have taught to look upon me as his only surviving parent, do you ask, Gordon Kendrick?"

There was a low groan, but no articulate words.

"Not because I meant to leave this world without making his real identity known, be sure, general! Even should sudden death come to me, I have left everything in shape; every point so clearly set forth that my—pardon! your son would find no difficulty in proving his birth-right. I tell you this, despite your repeated declaration that he is not your flesh and blood."

"He is not! I'll never acknowledge him as such!" flashed the old soldier, lifting his head and showing something of his old spirit.

"Yes you will," grimly retorted Uriah Sparks. "Even though I had to flee from town to save my neck, as I told you, I was faithful to the sacred trust you confided to me. I took every precaution to put the boy's identity on record. I even went so far as to indelibly mark the lad before responsible witnesses, at least two of whom are still living, able and ready to bear evidence as to the identity of your son and lawful heir. Is not that sufficient proof?"

"No! It would have been, once, when I believed you a true and honest man. Not now—not since you have shown the cloven hoof!"

"I was that true friend and honest man until I lost faith in human nature by learning to distrust you, the man for whom I freely gave up all that man holds dear and precious! And while there was even the ghost of a hope left, I fought hard and stubbornly for your boy, in defense of the trust you reposed in me. I fought your wife, her lawyers, the friends of—of your half-brother. They used every possible means to break me up and ruin me, before they tried to win through death what they failed to get while I lived. Then—but I told you enough of what followed."

"While starving, I kept that one point ever in mind: to preserve both your son and his identity. I knew that, should he live to grow up, he would be heir to a great fortune. And even after I lost all faith in you, Gordon Kendrick, I believed that I would eventually receive my just, well-earned reward from the hands of your son."

"For years—even after the war came to an end—you were lost to me, and I had come to believe that death had claimed you for its own; but then a lucky chance put me on the right track. I came here and saw you, without revealing myself. You had changed your name, and time had lent you an even better disguise; but I recognized you at a single glance."

"Why did I not reveal myself? Because I had grown to hate you far too bitterly to be content with simply your death; and I knew that if you and I should come face to face, then, I could not avoid slaying you outright!"

"And I—I would have greeted you with tears of joy!" muttered the old soldier, brokenly, bowing his head once more, hot tears trickling through his trembling fingers.

"That is why I made no sign, said no word," coldly added Uriah Sparks, showing no signs of relenting, seeming even more implacable than ever, if possible. "I had gathered enough money to pay for a place. I settled down, to watch and to wait. I wanted to study up some punishment severe enough to balance all I had lost through you and yours. Then—the boy who called me father, fell in love with the girl you call daughter! And I began to see my way through the fog!"

"But he cannot—marry my—his sister!"

"Wait: it is not your time for saying what can or cannot come to pass, Gordon Kendrick," harshly cried the arch-villain. "When that time comes, I'll let you know. Until then: listen to your master!"

"It was not so hard, this waiting. I had learned patience while wandering and suffering, looking for you. And—though you may well hesitate before believing, knowing what blood flows through his veins—I had grown to love the boy. I lived in and for him. I tried to anticipate his lightest wish. If he had cried for the moon, I would have invented some method of gratifying his desires."

Perry Sparks had grown wide-eyed as he listened, and now he made an involuntary movement of amazement. Uriah Sparks flashed him a look so fierce, so full of angry warning, that he dropped his eyes and sat motionless as though turned to stone.

"As I said, the boy fell in love with your—with Mercy. Only for that, I would not be here offering you a choice, as I now do. General Jerome Winston, lift your head and look into my face."

Mechanically the old soldier obeyed. His brief spirit had faded away. His naturally strong will seemed crushed by these repeated blows, and though he strove to fling defiance into that enforced gaze, it resulted in piteous failure.

"General, it rests with you whether I offer you the open palm of amity and old-time friendship, or show you the clinched fist of deadly enmity. If you elect the first, well and good. We'll bury the past, never to be resurrected by either. If you choose my enmity, I'll show you even less mercy than you showed to—the man who died in front of the old Planters' House, in St. Louis!"

"But—you ask what is impossible! Mercy is—is my child!"

"I have nothing to do with that. If Perry wishes to make her his wife, he shall have his will, or I'll tear the veil from the bitter black past, and publish your true story to the whole world!"

"But—she is his sister!"

"In law?" meaningly asked Uriah Sparks, showing his discolored snags in an ugly grin.

"Will you tell me how old the young lady is?"

"Nearly eighteen," faltered Winston, shivering anew.

"And your wife—your legal wife, of course, general! Your wife died less than fourteen years ago!"

"You lie, devil!" hoarsely cried Winston, springing to his feet; but before his outflung hands could touch his enemy, a sickening dizziness caused him to fall heavily back into his seat.

"You told me—last letter—that she was—dead!"

"I wrote that your wife never survived the shock of having the bloody corpse of her friend—your half-brother, Carroll Kendrick—brought into her presence, without a word of warning. Exactly! But I lied in so stating. Why? Because, since you had lost everything else, I wanted you to feel that your terrible injuries had been fully avenged on both of those who had wronged you. Just that, Gordon Kendrick!"

"I don't—I will not believe you, demon!" panted Winston.

"I have a copy of the death notice down home. I'll send it up for your inspection tomorrow, general. Now—let that point drop for the present."

"This being a fact, the lovely Mercy can claim no further rights than the legal heir sees fit to grant her. And, as I've already told you, I can positively prove that this, my son Perry, as he is generally supposed to be, is really and truly your son, Robin Kendrick!"

"I will never admit his claims!"

"Then you'll do a powerful sight worse. And I? Well, one of my first actions will be to communicate with the officers of the law at St. Louis. Time does not outlaw the crime of murder, and—"

"It was a fair street-fight," mumbled Winston, huskily.

"Where the fighting was all on one side?" sneered Sparks. "The coroner's jury seemed to think differently, for they brought in a verdict of murder, by Gordon Kendrick. And the grand jury took the same view of the case, for they returned an indictment of willful murder against Gordon Kendrick. A warrant was issued, but never served—you can readily guess why. But that indictment still holds, and one hint in the ear of the chief of police will bring men to arrest Gordon Kendrick, the long-ago assassin!"

"I did not—spare me, for—for my poor child's sake!" huskily moaned the wretched man, trembling like a leaf.

"If I spare you at all, be sure 'twill be for your child's sake—for the sake of your legitimate child, though!" laughed Sparks, cruelly, as he rose to his feet, leaning on the desk to add: "Now you know the very worst, Gordon Kendrick, as well as the only possible method of escaping the dread consequence of your past crime."

"'Twas justice, not a crime!" with a flash of spirit coming back.

"'Twas a hanging matter, all the same," grimly nodded Uriah Sparks. "And unless you come to Limerick in a hurry, I'll not only send word to St. Louis, where Gordon Kendrick

is now to be found, but I'll drop a hint into Robert Kendrick's ear where to find his father's slayer!"

CHAPTER XIX.

URIAH SEES A GHOST.

URIAH SPARKS paused to note and enjoy the effect of that last cruel blow, and it proved to be all that even his vicious enmity could wish for.

Jerome Winston looked and acted like one whose last remnant of will power has been hopelessly crushed. Even Perry Sparks, who had no particular reasons for loving the proud old soldier who had so imperiously driven him from his home, began to feel a trace of pity for him now that he was so utterly broken down.

Not so the elder man. Even now he was reluctant to relax his evil grasp, his malicious hatred growing by what it fed upon.

Yet he was not so entirely carried away by passion as to be blind to the truth. He saw that his victim had reached the final stage of endurance; to protract that torture would turn him into a dangerous assailant, or end in his death.

"I'll leave you to think the matter over, General Winston," he said, in quiet tones, picking up his hat and preparing to take his departure. "You can have four-and-twenty hours for reflection. At this time to-morrow I'll come for your final decision, prepared to bury the past if you conclude to accept the olive-branch, or—But you surely will not cut your own throat—or break your own neck, comes nearer the mark!"

With an ugly chuckle at this malicious hint, Uriah Sparks turned away from his victim, slipping a hand through the arm of the young mountaineer, giving him a fiery look that checked the words rising to his lips.

In silence they were permitted to pass from the room and leave the house. It may be doubted whether Jerome Winston fairly realized what was taking place, just then. That last cruel blow had completed his prostration.

"Didn't know the old gentleman was such a mighty magician, did you, sonny?" chuckled Uriah Sparks, casting a last glance toward the building before it was shut off from view by the edge of the timber line. "You only came in for the wind-up, but you saw enough to know that if I choose to whistle, the general is bound to dance!"

"How much of it was truth—how much an infernal lie?" almost savagely snarled the young man, his pent-up rage at last breaking bonds.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that you've sold me out! I mean that you've ruined the dearest, sweetest, richest hope I ever held."

"Hope, eh?" grinned Uriah. "I thought it was Mercy!"

"You lied to the general when you swore I was his son. There's not a drop of his blood running through my veins—and I know it!"

"Knowing infers proving, Perry. You heard me tell the general that I stood ready to back up my assertions with proof sufficient to convince even so reluctant a parent as he appeared to be. Can you put a hand over your heart and say as much—in my eyes?"

"I'm no son of his: I know that much!" with a surly growl.

"It's said to be a mighty wise son that knows his own father," chuckled Uriah, sitting sideways across the saddle, the more conveniently to carry on the discussion, which appeared to give him no little amusement. "And, after all, you may be right. So—let that point rest for the present, only taking care to remember that the legal heir of Gordon Kendrick is entitled to a great fortune, in hard cash as in real estate."

"Curse the fortune! I'd give all Missouri rather than lose Mercy Winston!"

"Really?" arching his shaggy brows in undisguised surprise. "Are you so far gone as all that comes to?"

"Have you forgotten what I told you before going to the general's house?" scowled the younger rascal. "I did all that for love of her, and if I could have even suspected what you intended doing, when I first sighted you this morning, I'd—"

"Sent a bullet instead of your voice, to halt me?" laughed Uriah, yet keenly watching that sullen, inflamed face at his side.

"I don't say that, but—"

"'Twould have been a strong temptation? Well," altering his tone and manner abruptly, "as I don't care about running any such risks, Perry, I'll talk plainly to you for a bit. You love this girl?"

"Better than all the world beside!"

"And you want to marry her, at once?"

"What's the use thinking—you've played the devil and all with my hopes!" flashing an angry glance into that yellow visage. "The old man was down on me, before; even though he'll fight my claims as his son, he'll use it as a further excuse for denying my wishes."

"Don't go quite so fast, Perry. There's more ways than one of killing a cat. And—if the general should consent to your marrying Mercy, would you take her, without making a wry face?"

"If she's my sister—even half sister—how can I?"

"Up to this moment only the general, you, and I know that much. If I say so, the general will keep his share of the secret, for the girl's sake. Can you do as much, for your own sake, Perry?"

"You mean—"

"That it rests altogether with you whether you marry Mercy, or see her carried off by Mossback Mose."

"I'd rather see her die a thousand deaths!"

"Then you shall have her, my gallant lad," laughed Uriah Sparks, bending lower in the saddle to utter in swift, guarded tones: "Provided that you do well the work that's cut out and ready for your hands!"

"What work? Curse it all!" his fiery temper flashing out. "Speak out, in plain terms, can't you? Rather than meekly take it by inches, as you gave it to Winston, I'd—"

He left the sentence incomplete, so far as words are concerned, but Uriah Sparks had no difficulty in supplying the rest. Under ordinary circumstances Perry was submissive enough, but now that his fierce passions were fully aroused, he might prove a dangerous rebel.

"You're not content to follow my instructions blindfold, then?"

"Not when you try to make out that I'm his son—her brother!"

"Truth is mighty, and will prevail in the end, no matter how much we try to doctor it to fit our own tastes, Perry, and—"

A storm of vicious oaths cut his speech short, and he sat his horse in silence until, his rage a little quenched by the outburst, the young mountaineer growled:

"I'd rather, a thousand times over, never have known it! I love Mercy to the very verge of distraction, and now—"

"What's to hinder your getting cured?" dryly asked Uriah.

"How?"

"By marrying her the hour after I've won the general's consent to the match."

"But if she is—you said—"

"I started to say, rather; but you cut me short. Now—listen, will you? What does it matter, if the girl herself never knows of it? If you love her so madly, you hadn't ought to be too particular. Then, too, there's no legal barrier in the way. A man can't have two legal wives at the same time, in Missouri, at all events. And, as I told the general, his real wife died less than fourteen years ago."

He ceased speaking, but Perry Sparks made no immediate response, striding rapidly along, his head bowed, his eyes resting on the ground. His color came and went, like one who has far more to think of than he knows just how to dispose of.

Minute after minute passed by without a word, rapid progress being made by rider and footman, their faces turned toward the cavern in which Garl Orton's secret still was located.

Uriah Sparks watched his son keenly if covertly, but was well content to leave him to think the puzzle out for himself. And it was not until they drew near the point where he must leave his horse, to cover the remainder of the distance on his own feet, that he spoke again:

"You seem to find it a particularly tough nut to crack, Perry?"

"So infernal tough that I could almost curse you for flinging it between my teeth!" savagely growled the young mountaineer.

"Yet you've only tried one side of it, my boy," grimly chuckled Uriah Sparks, reining in his horse and alighting, hitching the animal before saying further: "And you're wasting your time unless you can make up your mind to put in some mighty rough work to clear the way."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That those city chaps you speak of, must not only be caught, but proven spies—and punished as such. And Mossback Mose has got to be disposed of, as well. The only question is—can all this be done?"

"I'm willing enough, but—what is this Kendrick—the one Mose brought here—to the general?"

"You heard me say: the son of his half-brother, the man whom the general killed in St. Louis."

"You're dead sure he isn't the general's own son?"

"You are his son, and he had but the one child."

"I wish I knew better how to take you, father!" slowly muttered Perry, a puzzled frown wrinkling his brows.

"Take me as I offer myself, and believe that I'm working all for your own good, boy," was the quick, stern response. "And as for this young Kendrick—describe him to me: his face, figure—all!"

Perry Sparks obeyed, drawing such an accurate picture of the young adventurer that it was clear he had both seen and minutely studied him.

Uriah Sparks frowned darkly as he nodded his head repeatedly.

"He may not be a spy—I can hardly think that—but he's a thousand times worse: here hunting for the slayer of his father! He must never find him out! If he should—good-by fortune!"

"Curse the fortune! I'm thinking about Mercy!"

"I'll arrange matters so that you shall have the girl, if you contrive to prevent a meeting of Kendrick with Winston. You've got a dead-sure hold against him; press it without a let-up, until he's safely under the sod."

"I'll do my level best, if the boys haven't already run him down."

"If they have caught him, and not hung or shot him out of hand, remember that he's got to croak! Got to, boy!" viciously snarled Uriah Sparks, turning to glance over a shoulder at the face of his son by the dim light sifting in through the cave opening, into which they had just passed.

"You back me up, and together we'd ought to get there, with both feet, father," dimly laughed his hopeful son.

Nothing further was said, just then, for it is awkward talking and walking in almost complete darkness, even where men are thoroughly familiar with every foot of the distance they have to pass over.

This was one way of reaching the cave-chamber in which the illicit still, owned by a number of Hillers in partnership, though Garl Orton was the acknowledged head and manager, was being worked. There was another entrance, of which something remains to be said in the proper place, but this formed by far the shortest cut to all coming from the valley beyond, and on that account it had been chosen by Uriah Sparks and his son on this occasion.

There was yet a third entrance, or had been before the tornado most effectually sealed it up, as already described: though, as yet, none of the moonshiners were aware of that fact. But that mode of gaining the still was seldom used, on account of its difficult nature.

Uriah Sparks, perfectly familiar with the way, pressed on through the dark, quickly nearing the point where the two passages united in one, and just beyond which the two refugees had been so disagreeably surprised by the unexpected action of Garl Orton.

Although they had no reason to anticipate meeting any but friends, the two men instinctively slackened their pace at catching sound of human voices, and they had discovered those two dark, crouching shapes, dimly outlined against the firelight beyond, when that glowing ball shot past the refugees, filling the passage with a ruddy glare.

Instinctively the chums turned to look at the ball, and Uriah Sparks caught a fair view of Kendrick's pale, startled countenance.

"His ghost! Carroll Kendrick's ghost!" he gasped, in terror.

CHAPTER XX.

BANTAM AGAINST SHANGHAI.

THE instant that glowing ball of fire left his fingers, Garl Orton sprung across to where his long, old-fashioned ball-and-cap rifle stood leaning against the rock-wall, throwing forward its muzzle and calling out in stern tones:

"Stiddy, you critters! Tetch a weapon an' I'll blow ye through!"

The other moonshiners had been no less surprised than the two chums by this action on the part of their chief, and now they stood in open-mouthed amazement, staring at those figures, clearly outlined against the ruddy glow.

"Hold your fire, man!" sharply cried Rob Kendrick, lifting his unarmed hand with a gesture of truce. "We're honest men, not enemies!"

"What air ye doin' thar, then, stealin' in on us like a kipple o' cussed spies?"

"Spy yourself, old fellow!" boldly retorted Owen Price, whom nothing purely mortal could long hold in check. "We're just hunting for a way out of this infernal hole, into which we were driven by the storm, last night."

"I knowed it!" fairly howled Dick Branch, his stupid amazement vanishing before that speech. "They're the cussed spies what Mossback Mose fetched over hyar, to—"

"You're a liar!" indignantly interrupted Owen Price, stepping forward a pace as he dropped his Winchester to shake a small but very determined fist at the burly ruffian. "And if your fellows will hold their fire long enough, I'll agree to make you own as much, too!"

"Stiddy, men!" sternly cried Garl Orton, flashing his eagle eye over the stirring moonshiners. "They can't give us the slip, an'—"

"We have no notion of trying to slip you, gentlemen," said Kendrick, before even Owen could chip in again. "We're no spies, as we can fully prove, if you'll only give us a fair chance to explain."

"And while my friend is doing the explaining, I'm ready to make that awkward brute of a shanghai own up that he's a liar, born and bred!" boldly added Price.

Feeling as they did that the strangers, spies or no spies, could not escape without their permission, the moonshiners burst into an almost

general laugh at this—to them—ridiculous defiance.

All but Dick Branch, who gave a muffled howl of rage, only kept from rushing like a mad bull upon the audacious pigmy by his fear of his chief, grim Garl Orton.

"Le' me—jest le' me go fetch him in, boss!" he snarled, turning toward Orton with his brawny hands working angrily. "Shoot t'other ef ye like, but le' me finish that crowin' banty—jest le' me do it!"

"Go it, shanghai!"

"Chaw him clean up, an' spit him through a knot-hole!"

"Pin his ears back an' swaller him 'thout salt, Dick!"

"Come and try it on, you lubberly rascal," laughed Owen, putting up his hands and dancing lightly back and forth, seemingly forgetful of the deadly peril which menaced them as suspected spies.

This was by no means what Rob Kendrick had anticipated, nor what he would have chosen, had he been given an instant's warning before Owen made that truly characteristic break. But his keen eyes were taking note of everything before them, and among the rest he saw that Garl Orton, disturbed by that curious outburst, had lowered the old rifle from his shoulder, its muzzle now pointing toward the roof of the cavern.

Swift as thought his own Winchester leaped to a level, and he cried out sharply:

"I've got the crowd covered, but I'll only fire if you force me! You can see that it's a magazine, and you can't kill me so quick but that I can score at least half a dozen—"

"Pull trigger, an' we'll strip your hide off a-kickin'!" harshly cried Garl Orton, still gripping his rifle, but making no attempt to bring the long barrel back to a level, for he saw that he was covered, and that stern face had death plainly written upon it.

"I don't want to shoot: I'll not shoot, unless you force me, I tell you, gentlemen," quickly added Kendrick, making the most of the chance so unexpectedly given him. "Pass me your word of honor, as man to man, that you'll not condemn us without a fair trial, and I'll surrender without striking a single blow."

"Hold 'em level long enough for me to punch the pudding-bag that flannel-mouth calls his head, anyway!" cried Owen Price, his pugnacity increasing with each second's delay. "I can crawl all over any fool that can't tell a gentleman from a spy! And if he's afraid to face me single-handed, I'll lick him and any two of his fellows!"

Contrasting the two men, this assertion seemed so supremely ridiculous, that even grave Garl Orton relaxed into a broad grin. And where a man stops to laugh, the time for quick shooting has past.

"Kin I fetch the little cuss in, Orton?" hoarsely growled Dick Branch, tingling all over as from a fresh nettle-bath. "Say yes! It'll save one rope, anyway! Say I kin mash the dug-gun flea!"

"Let the shanghai come, Orton, and if I don't lick him in beautiful shape, we'll both surrender without another word!" boldly chimed in the warlike pigmy.

"Will you 'gree to that, stranger?" demanded Orton, nodding toward Kendrick.

"Say yes—it's our only chance!" swiftly whispered Price, but without turning his head toward his chum. "They've got us foul—I can lick him if he comes alone! Say yes!"

"Will you swear not to rush in at his heels?"

"I don't ax no help," growled Dick Branch, fairly beside himself with rage at such an idea. "I'll lick the critter as dast to make a step forward afore I've mashed that dug-gun fool!"

"And I'll shoot the one who offers to interfere before one of the other cries enough!" grimly declared Kendrick, then adding: "It is a bargain. Lick him, Owen!"

Price tore off his hunting coat, and swiftly as Dick Branch leaped forward, he was not quick enough to catch the pigmy off his guard.

If the moonshiner had been less nearly beside himself with hot, suffocating rage, he might have fared better, during those first few seconds; for though something of a thick-skull, slow to think where keen or accurate judgment was called for, he was naturally shrewd enough to reason that a man would hardly speak so boldly unless he possessed at least a partial ability to back his words with actions.

But he was too mad to think of anything further than coming to close quarters at once, knowing that his superior bulk and weight would easily enable him to crush that insignificant figure at once.

But instead of being caught, Owen Price dodged just far enough to foil that mad rush, then leaped forward, sending his hard fists out in advance of his body, raining half a dozen blows upon that face before he had to duck and shift ground again.

Each blow sounded like the crack of a whip, and every knuckle left its imprint on that fleshy face, cutting to the bone where the flesh was thinnest, raising lumps where no bones lay near the surface.

"Ef the kid ain't a-lickin' him, I'm a liar!"

exploded taciturn Tom Haller, finding his tongue unasked, for once, so intense was his amazement at that unlooked-for result.

"Ye lie!" howled Branch, now half crazed with mingled shame and fury. "I'll mash him to—"

"Say you will?" mocked Owen, leaping in and hammering away merrily at those already swelling eyes. "Have to do it—in a hurry, or—do it in the dark!"

"Back, all of you!" thundered Kendrick, misinterpreting that excited stir among the moonshiners. "I'll kill the first man to interfere! Lick or be licked—square and fair!"

"It's all we ax," as swiftly responded Garl Orton. "Down him, Dick! Will ye let sech a weenty runt— Now ye hev got him!"

All gravity was forgotten now in his intense excitement, for Owen Price, in making another shift of ground, slipped on a bit of loose rock, and before he could fairly recover his balance those brawny arms were wrapped around him.

Dick Branch gave a muffled roar of savage glee, swinging his adversary clear of the ground, trying to lift him above his head, to hurl him headlong to the rocky floor. But that was not so easily done.

Owen locked his legs about the moonshiner, bending his head and upper body back far enough to give full play to his arms, then sending in hot shot with the rapidity of a Gatling gun, and almost as much force!

Blinded, half stunned, Branch made a rush, forcing Kendrick to leap back and to one side to avoid interference which might be an excuse for the moonshiners to crowd in, thus destroying their last frail hope.

"Send 'em home, Owen!" he cried, encouragingly. "You've got him where the wool's short, and all that's left is for him to cry—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Perry Sparks darted out from the gloom back of the nearly burned-out fireball, and with clubbed revolver he struck Kendrick a vicious blow from behind.

The young man fell to the ground like a log.

CAPTER XXI.

ACCUSATIONS AND INSINUATIONS.

DICK BRANCH had fully shared the astonishment of the moonshiners at the manner in which that insignificant-looking little rascal evaded his rushes, constantly leaving his mark behind him, proving even more uncertain and difficult to catch than the flea to which he had scornfully likened him.

But Dick Branch, like all of his fellow Hillers, felt that the end had come the instant his savage grip closed on the pigmy, and his only thought was to make his victory complete at a single stroke.

He lifted Owen Price clear of the ground, seeking to whirl him aloft, then cast him headlong upon the rock-floor, where death or mutilation should be his fitting reward for ruffling up to a man!

But planning is not execution, and the pigmy was just contrary enough to object to being so quickly disposed of. He clung with his legs, spider-like. He plied his fists with the rapidity of machinery. He fairly blinded his burly adversary, while foiling that savage attempt to finally dispose of his case.

In his blind rage Dick Branch surged back and forth, one of his aimless flounderings forcing Rob Kendrick to spring back and to one side, bringing him within the treacherous reach of Perry Sparks.

That dastardly action was not seen by Garl Orton and his men, at first, with sufficient distinctness for them to divine just what was taking place, for all were breathlessly watching Dick Branch and his adversary.

Foiled in his effort to either lift Owen higher, or to hurl him bodily from him, the moonshiner tried to shift his grasp for another, more favorable for his purpose. But the instant he attempted this, the fighting pigmy improved his own advantage, shifting so as to give more swing to his arms, striking harder, swifter than ever.

He had not been able to break away from that bear-like hug, but he had done the next best thing, and Dick Branch quickly realized as much.

Giving over his first idea of killing or crippling the little fellow by a fall on the rocks, he reverted to his original boast—he would take the pigmy captive to his fellows, as the next best thing.

He started with that intention, but those fists hammered away at his eyes so vigorously that all he could see were countless stars and streaks of fire. So—with the roar of an angry bull, Dick Branch rushed madly ahead, to dash with stunning force against one side of the cavern, Owen Price twisting his person aside sufficiently to escape all material injury, while the moonshiner was saved from knocking his own brains out by his unusually thick skull.

The two men fell in a heap, but Owen was on his own feet, quick as a cat, full of fight as when that curious struggle first began.

All this passed with great rapidity, and though Perry Sparks lost no time in carrying out his hastily-improvised plans, he was hardly upon

Kendrick before the moonshiners and Owen Price recognized the situation.

His eager hands slipped in and out of the bosom of the fallen man, and there was a brief flutter of paper visible as he drew back with a harsh cry of exultation.

"Down 'em both!" he cried, in savage triumph. "They're the revenue spies I warned you against, and—"

"You're a liar!" screamed Owen, trying to steady himself for a leap upon that fresh adversary. "And I can just—"

"Stiddy, boys!" cried Garl Orton, as his sinewy arms close around Price, holding him as helpless as though in the embrace of a python. "Stiddy, all the rest o' you-uns! Captur' t'other, but don't hurt, or I'll ax fer a settlement my own self! I jest will!"

"Cowards! Sneaks! Liars—every dog o' ye!" screamed Price, doing his level best to break away from those arms, or at least to free an arm with which to partially avenge that outrage. "I licked your man! You swore—"

He had a far different man to deal with now, and despite his utmost efforts, Garl Orton pinned him to the floor, holding him helpless beneath his knees while using both hands to bind the pigmy fast.

With a rush, the rest of the moonshiners had come down upon Robin Kendrick, almost running over Perry Sparks—Uriah had not come forward, as yet, nor fully recovered from the sudden fright into which the totally unexpected sight of that pale, stern face had cast him. And when the young man began to recover his senses, scattered by that dastardly stroke from behind, it was only to find himself a helpless prisoner in the power of men who accounted it a virtue rather than a crime to put a Secret Service spy or revenue scout to death.

Had Garl Orton been equally hot-headed, or had his influence over the Hillers been one whit less strong, the prisoner would almost surely have been punished before being tried, for both Perry Sparks and his father were clamoring loudly for their lives, as a sacrifice demanded by their own welfare.

"They are spies, come here to smell out the lay of the ground, and have everything in readiness for the deputies to follow!" loudly asserted Perry Sparks, wildly excited, seeming fairly beside himself over his unlooked-for victory.

"Ef they be spies, salt won't save 'em," grimly observed Orton.

"If?" with a short, vicious laugh. "What else but spying out our secrets could have brought them here? And—who's the traitor who told them how to find the Black Water entrance? Who sold us out?"

"You're a liar if you call us spies!" cried Price, not a whit less bold because of his bonds. "I'll make you eat your words if these gentlemen will give me the use of only one hand—just one, you miserable, lying cur!"

"Fer lawd's sake, don't ye do it, Orton!" cried one of the Hillers, in mock dismay. "Look at pore Dick! The pesky critter'd chaw us all up in one gob—just one gob—ef he hed a chaine!"

This rude jest brought forth a laugh, for Dick Branch, partially recovered from his blind rush against the wall, was staggering forward from where he had fallen, blinking and puffing, the picture of a sorely dilapidated warrior indeed.

"I kin lick—whar's the dug-gun cuss run to?" he growled, spitting out several loose teeth as he glared stupidly about him.

Garl Orton strode forward, laying a heavy hand on the fellow's shoulder, speaking sternly:

"Drop that, Dick Branch. You tried lickin', an' a weenty runt no bigger sca'cely then my thumb, crawled all over ye. Now—we'll settle the rest like men, not durn fool' kids."

"He never licked—he can't lick—"

"I'll lick ye, Dick Branch, ef you say 'nother word. Button up. Go wash yer face, an' try to play ye're glad ye got off so easy. Ef ye sling out any more fightin' talk afo' we git this job settled, white-man fashion, thar won't be 'nough left o' ye to make a shadder in the sun. Understand?"

It was not often that Garl Orton spoke after this fashion, but when he did, the Hillers one and all knew that he was fully prepared to back up his words with deeds. And while opposition from any other man would have made him still hotter for revenge, Dick Branch yielded to Garl Orton without a murmur, slinking away into the darkness.

While this bit of by-play was going on, neither Uriah Sparks nor his son were idle. It seemed labor thrown away where all were so ready to convict the two prisoners of being spies, and consequently fit only for killing, but the two schemers felt that they had far too much at stake to waste a single moment.

Garl Orton saw what they were about, when he turned back from his brief scene with Dick Branch, and by the ruddy glow of the freshened fire his strong jaws were seen to grow squarer, his grave face looking more than ever like that of a hard, cool, desperate fighter.

"Order, gentlemen," he said, in grave, deep tones. "Sech business as this hain't fitten to be kerried on with a blind rush, nur yit all in the dark. Le's take it up calmly an' d'lib'rately. Le's cl'ar up each p'int as we come to it, an' then

we won't keep stumblin' over our own heels by gittin' all tangled up."

"What is there to deliberate over?" hotly cried Perry Sparks, dreading that cold, just judgment more than all the rest. "They are hounds sent out by an unjust, oppressive Government! They come here in disguise, to smell out the way honest men make their living—the only way we can make enough to keep our families from starving! And when they have done this they call in their armed devils, to smash and destroy, to kill or imprison, to insult and ravish! I appeal to you, men of the Ozarks! What do such sneaking devils deserve?"

There came a sullen, deadly roar by way of answer. Not a word could be distinguished, yet never could words speak more clearly than that wild-beast growl!

Only Garl Orton was silent, and he merely long enough to let that deadly sound subside sufficiently for his voice to be heard.

"It don't sca'cely need fer me to say that my vote'll go the same way, when the critters is fairly an' squarly proved guilty o' bein' spies. But I'm fer givin' 'em a show to cl'ar themselves, ef they kin."

"I came here, hot-foot, to tell you I'd received warning that men were being sent to this region to look up whisky matters," chimed in Uriah Sparks, deeming it high time to cast his influence into the scale against that of the moonshiner chief. "You know our friends. And I am almost ready to make oath that these two rascals are the very spies that warning indicated."

"If you, sir, or any other man dares to insinuate that we are employed by any one connected with the Internal Revenue Service, I brand you as a liar!" sternly cried out Rob Kendrick, helpless as to his body, thanks to the strong bonds which had been applied, but still able to defend himself with his tongue.

"And I'm backing that up, tooth and nail!" boldly chipped Owen Price, full of fight as ever.

"What were they doing, then, stealing up in the dark and listening to your talk?" hotly put in Perry Sparks. "Can they deny that? We saw them spying upon you, just before you threw that fireball, Garl Orton. Let them try to lie away that fact, if they dare?"

"Give us the chance that one white man owes another, by right, and we can explain all to your complete satisfaction," declared Kendrick.

"Go look at the hole the storm drove us in at, and you'll see why we had to come this way," added Owen Price. "The wind upset a big rock and blocked our way out the way we came in. So—what else could we do?"

"A man that's mean enough to play spy, is none too good to cover his tracks with lies," sneered Uriah Sparks.

"Stiddy, all o' ye!" sternly cried Garl Orton, his gray eyes glowing vividly. "How kin we 'spect to git at the bottom ef you all keep on stirrin' up the mud? One at a time. An' you," turning toward Perry Sparks. "You say these is the two men you spoke of, yest'day?"

"As being in camp near Wolf Creek—yes."

"But you said, too, that Mossback Mose guided 'em thar?"

"You heard him say as much yourself."

"Which is jest why I'm in favor o' goin' a leetle slow right now, you understand?" gravely retorted Garl Orton. "We all know what Mose Hunter is. A truer, whiter, honestest man never drew breath o' life."

"I know!" snarled Sparks, showing his teeth viciously. "You seem to think that the sun rises in his boots. But is he altogether above suspicion?"

"I don't know a man on top o' this wide airth I'd rather trust than that same lad," was the earnest response.

"Keep that trust as long as you can, Garl Orton, but don't crowd it down the throats of men who know better. I am one of that number. I say that so far from being above suspicion, Mossback Mose ought by rights to be lying yonder, trussed up for hanging, together with his spies!"

"You wouldn't dast say them words afore his face, Perry Sparks."

"I say them before all the world! I ask you where Mose gets all his money? What takes him to St. Louis so often? Why does he haunt the District Marshal's office while there? Why—unless to report his spying and receive his head-money?"

"You're a liar, from the ground up, Perry Sparks!"

CHAPTER XXII.

MOSSBACK MOSE FILLS THE BREACH.

THAT voice seemed to fill the entire cavern, and as its familiar notes were heard, Perry Sparks leaped back, drawing a revolver with all the swiftness at his command, his face turning almost ghastly with—if not terror, closely allied to that emotion!

For, springing out of the darkness beyond the circle illumined by the fire, came Mossback Mose in person, his eyes glowing hotly, his face showing the effects of that pernicious drug, his frame clearly weakened by what he had suffered.

But his mind no longer rested under a cloud, and his heart was as strong, as true, as honest as of old. And boldly facing the recoiling villain, making no effort to draw a weapon or to guard against that threatened shot, Moses Hunter spoke again:

"Now say them words over, you dirty cur! an' I'll—"

Perry Sparks jerked up his pistol and fired. He meant to kill, too, and possibly would have done so, despite his trembling hand, only for the swift action of Garl Orton.

One sweep of his long rifle struck up that pistol, even as it exploded, knocking the weapon far away and bruising Perry's hand so that it was disabled, at least for a time.

"Stiddy, men!" the giant thundered, whirling toward Mossback Mose, who was drawing a revolver in turn. "I'll mow a swath through the hull o' ye ef— An' you, Mossback Mose, hev got to clear your own skirts afo' you jump on any other critter!"

Mose Hunter stopped short where he was, hand on pistol, but making no further attempt to draw the weapon. His gray eyes flashed around from face to face, growing brighter, sterner as he noted those altered looks.

He must have been blind not to have remarked the change wrought in his one-time friends by the last few hours. And remarking that, he was wise enough to accept the situation gracefully.

"All right, Uncle Garl," he said, with a short hard laugh. "I owe that p'izen liar a shot, but it'll keep."

"And we owe you a rope, Mose Hunter!" snarled Perry Sparks, rallying desperately, knowing now that it must come to a pitched battle out of which they both could not come alive.

"Kin you tell me what fer, Uncle Garl?"

"For selling us all to the revenue sharks!" croaked Uriah Sparks.

"You shet!" flashing a wicked glance in that direction. "I was talkin' to a white man, not a skunk!"

Garl Orton said never a word, but held out his empty hand, gazing steadily, half-sorrowfully into the face of the young man whom he, like many another, had learned to love.

"Ef you ax it, Uncle Garl," gravely spoke Mossback Mose, drawing his pistols and turning their handles toward that hand. "That lyin' cur can't pluck up 'nough grit to take 'nother shot at a man, even ef that man is onarmed."

"Not when he knows that I'll shoot back ef he tries it on," was the cold response, as Orton took the weapons and thrust them into his side pockets.

"All right, Orton," laughed the mountaineer, tossing back his head with a return of his old recklessness in face, and voice and manner. "You've got my guns: somethin' that no other man ever done. Nur you couldn't 'a' tuck 'em, only fer one thing."

"You give 'em up, like a man, at my askin', Mose."

"Jest fer that one thing, Orton, an' you, fellers," flashing a keen defiant glance around the gathering. "Jest fer that one thing, I'd hev p'inted to the past an' told ye all to read that fer my record. Then—I'd hev fit the hull crowd, ef it didn't own up it was chawin' on lies as foul an' black as the dirty nigger as set 'em afloat!"

"Hard words won't do no good, Mossback," frowned Orton.

But the mountaineer paid no attention to his words. He had set out to clear his mind, and he stuck doggedly to the point.

"Some low-down cur fed me Devil-weed, an' I wanted to keep my hands free to deal with him, when found out. Ontel I've paid him off, I don't feel like I'm my own man. Pay him I will—ef it takes twenty long years to onkiver the cowardly whelp!"

With that last fierce vow, all excitement seemed to vanish from his being, and when he turned to squarely confront Perry Sparks, Mossback Mose was cool and composed, altogether unlike his old self.

"Now fer you, critter," he said, the words coming smooth and even. "What sort o' charges be they that you fetch for 'ard ag'in' me?"

"I bring no charges—simply facts," snarled the dark-browed mountaineer, his bruised hand supported by its mate, his eyes glittering like those of an angered snake.

"Wait!" interposed Uriah Sparks, spots of red showing on his yellow cheeks. "Let's go at this matter in regular order. I appeal to you, Garl Orton!"

"Which?"

"We claim that Moses Hunter is equally guilty with those two spies lying yonder. We claim that it is unjust to all honest men to let one criminal give the cue to his mates, by permitting them to hear jest what excuses he has to offer, that they may know how to fit their story to his!"

"Sense when was you lected jedge, Uriah Sparks?" sneered Mose.

"Stiddy, Mose!" frowned Garl Orton, then gravely gazing at the old man for a few moments before saying: "I ain't so mighty sure I've ketched your meanin', Sparks, but ef—"

"Stow those two spies far enough away so

that they can't hear the answers Mossback Mose makes to the sins laid at his door!"

"Oh, come off!" impatiently cried Owen Price from where he lay in bonds. "You're making a mighty rumpus over what can be settled by one little word: *lies!* Those two thieves are lying, from start to finish! And if you'll just loose my hands for five minutes, I'll agree to punch the whole truth out of 'em both!"

"He kin do it, too!" grimly laughed Tom Haller, whose fancy had been taken captive by the marvelous performance given by the pugnacious pigmy a short time before.

"Stiddy!" harshly growled Mossback Mose, leaping back a pace nearer his recent employers. "I ain't sayin' a word ag'in' doin' this, ef Garl Orton says it ain't a trick to butcher 'em. But ef that pledge ain't comin', then you've got to kill me afore you tetch them!"

"All we ask is a fair trial and—"

"A square hanging to follow—just so!" laughed Uriah Sparks, rubbing his skinny hands together. "That's good enough for us, so—give your pledge, Orton, and let's get down to sober business."

Mossback Mose watched the giant moonshiner closely through all this, his brows contracting a little as he noted that grave expression, those slow, measured movements.

They told him how seriously Orton viewed this case, and how hard he was striving to show rigid impartiality toward all. But he knew, only too well, what implacable hatred the moonshiner felt for all connected with the revenue service, which he held to be an invention of the devil for the express purpose of oppressing honest men.

Could he clear both himself and his employers of even the shadow of suspicion? Nothing less would save them. With such a judge and jury, the usual conditions were reversed; the accused must furnish the proof, not the accusers.

Orton looked at each one of his neighbors, to learn if any one among them had an objection to offer to the course proposed by Sparks. Each man nodded his approval in turn, and not until then did Orton break the silence.

"I don't reckon you mean to ketch any 'vantage by this, Mr. Sparks, but mebbe it'd be jest as well to let the boys know why you made the proposition."

"For one thing, I saw that rascal," pointing out Kendrick, "payin' particular attention to every word Moses Hunter uttered. I may be wrong, but I believed he was taking notes, to tell his story according to the one given by his guide, and that led to my making the suggestion."

"I ain't kickin' ag'in' that," coolly chimed in Hunter. "All I ax fer is a decent show, an' no killin' in the dark or ahind my back!"

"I'll pass ye my word, Mossback, an' ef you want more—"

"I'd be wuss then a hog to ax it, Orton," frankly interrupted the mountaineer, reaching out and clasping that sinewy hand. "You're clean white, but after the way Perry Sparks tuck a snap-shot at me—a sick man, jest out o' bed, an' with han's empty—you can't wonder at my misdoubtin' him!"

"I'll answer fer him, from this time on," was the grave response, then beckoning to Tom Haller and Brack Johnson, he signed for them to assist himself and Hunter in carrying the bound men further away to a point out of earshot.

The direction taken was directly opposite that by which the prisoners had approached the fire, and they were deposited on the bare rock floor, in utter darkness. Then, bidding them have patience, Garl Orton led the way back to the firelighted chamber.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SPARKS TRIES FOR A TRIPLET.

FROM first to last Garl Orton acted with a deliberation which, more than aught else, betrayed how deeply important he regarded this grave dispute which had arisen within their own ranks.

His one aim was to probe the matter to the very bottom, and greatly as he liked Mossback Mose, that affection would not lighten his vengeance, should guilt be fairly fastened upon his head.

No man who was at all acquainted with the giant moonshiner could really think him partial, or favorable to the escape of prisoners who came within the "dead lines" marked out by the Hillers. Neither Uriah nor Perry Sparks really suspected him, on this occasion, even after he had interposed just in time to keep the two bound men from being disposed of without further delay; but with so much at stake, neither of those evil tricksters dared run any risks beyond those which were actually necessary, and though Garl Orton had left them out when picking help to remove the prisoners, both father and son crowded after to make sure all was carried out on the square.

Reassured on this point, they fell back before the quartette, and taking up their stand on the further side of the fire, whispered hurriedly together for a few moments.

They were not interrupted. Garl Orton was acting with almost painful deliberation, and

Mossback Mose leaned against the wall, displaying a rare degree of patience for one whose hot, rash, impetuous temper had won for him the title of "Bald Hornet."

This might be partly accounted for by the physical sufferings he had undergone since first feeling the effects of that noxious weed. He showed this in his face, bleached to an unnatural hue, his eyes surrounded by leaden circles, his nostrils looking pinched and white.

There was an unwonted stoop to his broad shoulders, and a lack of elasticity about his motions which none of those present had ever remarked before this evening.

All of this might be laid to that poisonous dose, but at least a share of that unusually grave expression came from the fact that, try to ignore it as he might, Moses Hunter knew that he was about to be put on trial—for his life!

There was no exaggeration in that thought. A native of the Ozarks himself, perfectly familiar with the bitter prejudices held by the Hillers, and with their stern, relentless method of dealing with their hereditary enemies, he knew that being unable to perfectly clear his skirts of even the strong suspicion of playing the traitor by lending aid and comfort to revenue spies, would surely seal his fate.

There could be no middle course—no Scotch verdict of "not proven." He must meet each and every charge or hint brought up against him, plainly proving his innocence on all points, or—pay the penalty!

These reflections were passing through his brain while Garl Orton was busied passing from man to man, whispering or hearkening, until only Mossback Mose and the two Sparks had been missed. They were to have their say later—the rest were to sit in judgment.

Garl Orton drew back to the smooth stone on which he had been sitting when his keen ears first caught warning of the two strangers coming within range. He sat down, balancing his long rifle across his legs, baring his head and slowly running a hand through his hair.

"It's a nasty job, gentlemen," he said, slowly, glancing from Mossback Mose to his accusers. "I never tuck holt o' one as give me nigh sech a powerful wish 't it hedn't never come up. But sence it *hes* come up, thar's jest one way to deal with it: to hev both sides tell all they know, an' jedge a'cordin'."

Mossback Mose left his lounging position, stepping out where the ruddy glow was brighter, regaining much of his usual power and rude grace now that the test was coming.

"I reckon part o' that speech is shot off at me, Uncle Garl?" he asked, smiling frankly as he met that keen, grave gaze.

"I reckon it was, Moses," nodded the giant mountaineer. "You was nigh 'nough to hear anyway part o' what Perry Sparks flung out ag'in' your good name."

"I heard him spit out a lot o' p'izen—p'izen by smell, an' p'izen by natur!"

"If you've got an antidote for it, Mossback, then I'm willing to pay the penalty for charging what I can't back up, solid," quietly retorted Perry Sparks, now seeming cool as he was confident, thanks to the shrewd advice so hurriedly breathed in his ear by Uriah.

"I don't say I can match you at slingin' lies, critter, beca' I hed a honest man fer a daddy, while you—your pap set out nussin' lies as a baby, an' he bain't ever bin weaned yit!"

"Stiddy, gentlemen!" sternly interposed Garl Orton, lifting a hand. "This ain't a fitten time fer jawin' back, ur flingin' mocks. We're here to git at the hull truth, an' to see that sober justice is done. An' whar that justice may stretch so fer as shootin' or hangin', we'd ort to set about it ca'mly an' d'lib'rately, like white men."

"We ask nothing better on our sides, judge," quickly said Perry Sparks, making a point while the chance offered. "I never would have brought this ugly business forward, had only my own welfare been at stake: I could fight back, but—it concerns every man inside this cave, as well as their wives and little ones, back home!"

"Waal, sence we all want to git at the bottom truth the quickest way, I reckon mebbe it mought be jest as well to hev a 'greement which side shell be fu'st to tell tha'r story. Ef I'm off, mebbe some o' these gentlemen kin p'int out a better way."

"One moment, Uncle Garl," spoke up Mossback Mose. "Ef I'm not off the right trail, them critters 'cuse me o' sellin' out the Hillers?"

"Ef not jest that, o' bein' pardners with our enemies."

"One's pritty much the same as t'other, I reckon. Waal, let Perry Sparks an' his pap fetch out jest what I've bin doin' that's out o' the squar'."

"Will that suit, gentlemen?"

"Got to," nodded gruff Tom Haller. "How kin Mose fend hisself ef he don't know the p'int they're hittin' at?"

The Sparks interchanged quick glances, both frowning a bit. This was nearer level-handed justice than they either expected or desired. But Uriah gave a little nod, and Perry took a step forward, to present his side of the case.

Since it was out of the question to rouse the moonshiners to lynching-pitch, where Mossback

Mose alone was concerned, he knew that he would have to put forth his utmost efforts to carry his point.

"I accept that decision, Judge Orton," he began, with a bow that included all save Mossback Mose. "And in as few words as the vast importance of this ugly business will permit, I'll give you my views.

"To start with, let me assure you, one and all, that I am not acting after this fashion because of any past hard feelings which may have risen between myself and Moses Hunter—"

"Talk 'bout angels o' mercy an' forgiveness!" breathed Mossback Mose, rolling his eyes upward, crossing his big brown hands over his bosom. "Go 'way—"

"Stiddy, Mossback!" sternly ejaculated Garl Orton. "Button up an' wait fer your turn to come, sence you wanted it that way."

"'Twas a bit o' the Devil-weed spoke, not me, judge," meekly murmured the Bald Hornet, dropping both hands and eyes.

He knew he had made his point, and was content. Once switched off that delicate track, Perry Sparks would hardly attempt it again.

"To come to the point at once, judge, and you, neighbors, I'll admit honestly that I've had my suspicions concerning Mose Hunter for more than a year back. First: I could not understand how he always had an abundance of money, without ever doing a week's solid work."

"Got rich 'long o' mindin' my own business, 'course."

"Nor could I just understand what business Mossback Mose could have important enough to take him off to St. Louis so often," steadily continued Perry Sparks, paying no attention to that second interruption. "And putting the two things together, I made up my mind that the gentleman ought to be looked after a bit."

"Pity you didn't let me know how much you thought o' me, afore!" grimly laughed the Bald Hornet. "I mought 'a' made it so much more interestin' fer ye, Sparks!"

"While it lasted, no doubt you would," with an ugly sneer that sufficiently pointed his meaning. "But I was working for the interests of all the Hillers, and if only on that account my life was precious."

"Mebbe I'm uncommon dull this a'ternoon," Garl Orton spoke up, frowning a bit. "Eyther I be, or else you're powerful slow in gittin' down to business, Mr. Sparks. Ef you've really got any *proof* to fetch ag'in' Mossback Mose, the quicker you trot it out, the sooner we'll know jest what's afore us."

"I believe I have sufficient to condemn not only Moses Hunter, but the two spies whom he guided here as well," boldly declared Sparks.

"Le's hev it, then."

"You all know that Mossback Mose went to St. Louis, nearly two weeks ago, on one of his mysterious trips. I followed him, resolved to keep track of his movements until I'd gather proof enough to convict him of playing us false, or had proven myself an ass for thinking evil of an honest man."

"I kept track of his movements for a couple of days, then lost sight of him, but picked up the trail again the next morning. Where? In a police court, where Mossback Mose was under arrest for having been drunk and disorderly!"

"Hunter acted so queerly that his lawyer put in a plea of insanity, which his client backed up as well as his limited means would permit. The little trick didn't work as they hoped, for the judge found him guilty as charged, and sentenced him to fine and imprisonment."

"Is that the crime you're tryin' to fetch out, Mr. Sparks?" asked Garl Orton, a puzzled look coming into his grave countenance.

"It helps lead to it—yes," was the positive response. "I met a friend in court, and he told me something about the man who had volunteered to defend the prisoner—Mossback Mose, I mean. That friend told me the lawyer was closely connected with the internal revenue service, and that he had done more than any other man in Missouri to break up illicit distilling."

"That information only helped strengthen my suspicions, and I kept my eyes open all the wider from that time on."

"Hunter had claimed that he had been robbed of all his money, and as he could not pay his fine, he was at once sent to jail. Yet the very next day I saw him on the streets, in company with the two prisoners back yonder! I dared not attempt to catch their words, for there was no crowd, and no cover. But I made a point of finding out all I could about those two new friends of Hunter's."

"Thanks to my friend, of whom I spoke, I had them down fine before midnight. I learned that the smaller man was named Owen Price. That he lived in Washington, where he was in the Secret Service: holding a high commission, and having the confidence of the Government."

"The larger, younger man, was named Robert Kendrick, and his home was in St. Louis. He claimed to be a lawyer, but he seldom had a case—in open court, at least. My friend told me that he did considerable work, in a private way, for the District Marshal, and that at least on two different occasions he had formed one of a posse out hunting for and breaking up private stills."

A low, ugly muttering broke forth from those silently listening men, and Perry Sparks knew that he had made at least one important point. But he had yet more to present, and he quickly added:

"To boil it all down, judge, and you, gentlemen, I soon found out that Moses Hunter had hired out to those two men—Price and Kendrick—as guide. That they gave out they were bound on a hunting expedition into the Ozarks, where Mossback promised them rich game and plenty of excitement. *What that game was*, I leave you to guess!"

"Do you dast to even hint that I 'greed to show 'em this still?" sharply demanded Mossback Mose, his eyes glittering vividly.

"I give no hints: I am dealing strictly with facts. Explain them if you can, Moses Hunter!" sternly retorted Perry Sparks.

And once more that ugly muttering sound broke forth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MOSSBACK MOSE EXPLAINS.

So far from quailing before those dangerous looks, Mossback Mose appeared to gather fresh strength from the growing peril, his magnificent figure rising erect, his deep chest swelling, his eagle-eyes flashing stern defiance around him as he stood waiting for the mutterings to subside or burst forth into the death-yell.

"Stiddy, men!" sternly cried Garl Orton, shifting his long rifle to a position commanding his neighbors. "Time 'nough to yelp when the trail is fairly onkivered."

Then, looking at Perry Sparks, he asked: "Hev you got through? Hev you ary mo' to offer ag'in' Mose?"

"Not just at present," bowed Sparks, with the grim smile of one who does not care to expend all his ammunition at the outset. "Let Mossback Mose explain away what I have already charged him with."

"That Mossback Mose kin do, an' not w'ar the hide off o' his tongue-tip, nuther," laughed the Bald Hornet, contemptuously. "What hev you raked up, 'cept a passel o' lies, too weak an' too thin to fool a blind idiot 'bout any ears an' lackin' sense from his birth?"

"Taking *you* as sole judge, that might be the verdict, but luckily you are being tried before shrewd, honest men."

"Ef you've finished, jest step back a bit, Perry Sparks, an' let Mose hev his turn," gravely interposed Garl Orton.

With a bow of submission, the young mountaineer fell back to the side of his father, bending his head to catch a hasty whisper from those thin lips.

Mossback Mose, standing proudly erect, the personification of manly strength and grace, though on such an extensive scale, swept his keen gaze over those dark, scowling faces, hardly one of which did not show unmistakable signs of hatred where once had been respect and liking, if not actual love for the accused.

"I never reckoned the day would come when I'd hev to face you all, neighbors, with so many ugly looks comin' back to me," he began, his voice clear, his tones even and composed. "But since that day *hes* come, I'll do my level best to make some o' you feel powerfully ashamed o' yourselves!"

"I'll start in whar Perry Sparks begun: an' I'll say that it's no man's business *whar* I got my money from, 'long's I pay all my owin's when I'm taxed fer 'em. An' as fer why I've went off to St. Louey so many times, that lies atwixt me an' a gentleman ag'in' whom not even a cussed rattler kin spit his p'izen—Giner'l Winston, no less!"

"Bear in mind, gentlemen, that Moses Hunter was first to lug in the name of Jerome Winston," blandly said Uriah Sparks, grinning maliciously as he rubbed his skinny hands together. "Just make a note of that, for *we* may see fit to call the worthy old soldier as a witness for *our* side—later!"

"Then it'll be a honest veteran comin' at the call of a skulkin' home guard!" retorted Mose, with a sneering laugh. "But Giner'l Winston kin answer fer himself, an' this isn't gittin' on with my story."

"I don't deny that I was 'rested, in St. Louey, but I *do* say that the charge was a lie, an' that it was proved sech, before I'd spent two hours in the jug."

"I was slugged by a couple of toughs, fer my money, I reckon. They tuck me from ahind, in the dark, an' never giv' me a show to hit back or fight fer my goods. They laid me out, an' I reckon they'd hev put out my light fer good, ef they'd tuck time to measure the thickness o' my skull afore skippin'. As it was, they didn't miss it overmuch."

"The police ketched me up, when I was crazy as a bedbug, kivered all over with blood—I kin show the crack they putt into the back o' my head, ef you want to take the trouble to look at it."

"Never mind, fer now," and Garl Orton shook his head.

"Bein' crazy, I tuck the police fer the same critters as downed me, an' 'course I laid the fu'st one out, as tackled me. I done the same

to two or three more when they come up, but then they downed *me*, in turn, an' toted me off to the station."

"Waal, as I said afore, I was charged with being drunk an' disorderly, an' I hedn't got over bein' crazy then! A gent did what he could to fend me, but he didn't quite make it—then. He did, later, by fetchin' a doctor, who wasn't long in makin' out what was the matter with me. An' so—jest how, I'll never tell ye—they two gentlemen got me turned loose."

"The lawyer tuck me to his office, whar he giv' me a bed. An' the next day the doctor come to finish his good work. I was able to tell him who I was, an' whar I'd come from. He went away, sayin' that I'd be all right in a little time."

"Afore night, that same day, a young feller come in 'long 'ith the doctor, who told me his name was Kendrick: that he was wantin' to find some one who could tell him a bit 'bout the Ozark hills, up this way, whar I'd told the doctor I lived."

"At fu'st I didn't jest know what to make of it, the young feller axed so many questions 'bout the hills, namin' one or two p'int that it didn't 'pear noways likely a city chap—an' a stranger to the Ozarks, as I soon diskivered, would or could know even by name. But the longer he talked, an' the more I watched an' studied him, the better he seemed to pan out, an' afore the eend I told him all he felt like axin' fer."

"Waal, when he'd got it pritty well fixed that I was jest what I held out to be, an' that I knowed all the ground he wanted to kiver, the young fellow come out plain, saying that he was tired o' stickin' to work an' the city, an' both needed an' wanted to take a huntin' trip whar all the game hedn't bin run out by city chaps with tha'r scatter-guns an' tha'r bird-dogs."

"That's the excuse *he* give, an' it didn't sound so mighty onreasonable, come to think it over. But I knowed he meant heap sight more than his tongue told me, though I never let on. An' when he axed would I go 'long with him an' a fri'nd, as guide, I said yes!"

"Why? What for? If not to hunt, what *did* he want?" asked Garl Orton, his brows contracting in a frown, his face betraying almost as much sorrow as anger, for he felt that Mossback Mose had made a fatal admission, just when he was winning a more favorable opinion from the Hillers sitting in judgment."

"Kendrick never told me, but I ketched onto it afore we was two days out o' St. Louey," coolly replied the Bald Hornet, smiling.

"What was it, then?" sharply demanded Orton.

"Them two gents come out hyar to hunt fer a buried treasure!"

If Mossback Mose had planned for a sensation, he surely must have been gratified by what followed that crisp speech. The Hillers broke into excited cries, and for a few minutes all was at a standstill.

"Stiddy, men!" cried Orton, springing to his feet the better to win attention. "Thar's three men on trial for tha'r lives, an' the least we can do is to hold in ontel *this* one hes a show to cl'ar himself of what, if 'proved onto him, means sartin' death!"

His personal influence, even more than his stern words, produced the desired effect, and the Hillers resumed their former positions, silence reigning. Yet there was a perceptible difference from that which had ruled before. One and all of the moonshiners were eager to learn more about that hidden treasure.

"Long afore I found it out fer dead sure, I ketched 'nough side-talk to make me pritty knowin' what they was eetchin' fer: I reckoned it was that afore I made the barg'in to act as their guide, mind ye!"

"Waal, sence they was sorter playin' of it low down onto me, I didn't make no bones 'bout playin' it onto them, to git even. An' so, watchin' my chaine, I jest sneaked the paper they was so fond o' lookin' over atwixt tha'r two lonesome selves; an' then I knowed I'd hit off the right trail, fu'st jump!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The paper was a sort o' map, settin' down diff'rent p'int, an' markin' one in p'tic'lar as bein' whar the money was hid. I knowed the p'int, all 'cept the main one; that didn't seem to fit in like all the others. An' I knowed the paper, too! Why not? I'd toted it 'round with me fer many a long year!"

"You had?" ejaculated Garl Orton, now seeming as thoroughly interested as any one of the excited Hillers.

"I jest hed!" nodded the Bald Hornet, emphatically, a broad grin on his big face. "An' ef I ain't mighty wide off the right trail, 'twas 'long o' that bit o' paper that I was slugged in St. Louey, that night! Money helped, mebbe, but 'twas to git that treasure map the critters tackled me, mainly."

"You say the map b'longed to you?" slowly asked Orton. "Then, ef 'twas yourn, why didn't ye claim it, fu'st off?"

"That needs a little tellin'," laughed Mossback Mose, but growing grave as by a magic change the next instant. "I never ketched even a

glimp' o' the critters as downed me, but I knowed they tuck my map. An' so, when I found out who hed that map, what was I to think? Jest what you or ary one else would 'a' reckoned: that them two young fellers hed slugged me fer it, an' never s'pected I was the owner when they axed me to go with 'em as a guide!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A SUCCESSION OF SURPRISES.

THE Sparks, father and son, simultaneously burst out laughing.

"Talk about lying! Where would you go to find such another mass of silly lies?"

"All the Ozarks know what a gentle, meek, mild, forgiving lamb of peace-at-any-cost Moses Hunter is!" sneered Uriah Sparks, backing up his son to the best of his ability. He'd rather serve the man who smote him! He'd rather guide the robbers to his treasure, than create disagreeable feeling by demanding his own! And—he'd try to save those thieves and thugs from justice, by coating his face with triple brass the better to stand up before honest men and lie for their lives!"

"If not all a clumsy lie, hatched up in the hopes of saving three of the blackest rascals unhung—two spies and one traitor—why did not Moses Hunter keep his property when it had come back to his hands? Let him explain that point, before he asks us to believe more!"

Through all this, Mossback Mose had stood at ease, his gaze passing from face to face, according to which pair of lips were speaking. And now, when Perry Sparks broke off with a vicious sneer of triumph, he looked at Garl Orton, who was watching him with sorely-troubled gaze.

"Ask the critter, Uncle Garl, how he knows I didn't hang fast to my propety, as he calls the treasure-map."

Perry Sparks flushed hotly, then turned very pale as all eyes were turned upon him, guided by that cool, half-quizzical hint. He saw that he had let his enemy carry him too fast and too far, but covered the slip as well as he knew how.

"Ask him to show that map in evidence, then, before expecting us to believe such a preposterous lie!"

"That don't even begin to 'splain how he come to know I didn't hang fast to my propety when I'd got a fresh hold onto it," grimly smiled the Bald Hornet, his tones growing harder as he rapidly added: "I'll tell ye jest why, ef I'm giv' a chance."

"It went 'cordin' to natur' that I should think them as hed my propety was them as hed stol'd it from me. I wouldn't 'a' bin a common man ef I hedn't 'a' longed fer to git even, and so—"

Perry Sparks started to chip in again, but Uriah caught his arm, almost fiercely, hissing in his ear:

"Peace, you idiot! Can't you see? He's going to save himself by selling his employers! Quiet! They first—him later!"

Mossback Mose broke off at that interruption, only resuming after his would-be rival shook his head to intimate that he had nothing to say, having thought better of it.

"Ye see, gentlemen, when I made up my mind that they was the ones who slugged me, I reckoned I'd lay back an' take my time. Ef I could manage it so I could hev some fun out of it afore pay-day come, I'd be jest that much ahead. See?"

"I ain't so mighty sure," slowly said Garl Orton. "We ain't tryin' you fer bein' robbed, nur them critters fer stealin' a paper. What we want to know most is—air them fellers spies?"

"No, sir, they are not spies!" positively declared Mossback Mose. "I made sure that they neither of them had any connection with the Internal Revenue service before I entered their employ. I give you my sacred word of honor to that effect!"

In his earnestness the accused dropped his rough, illiterate manner of speech, but in the excitement none of those present seemed to notice the fact.

"Honor among thieves!" croaked Uriah Sparks, catching at the word.

"I'll honor you—by cracking your skull with an honest man's fist!" sternly cried Hunter, resolved to check those malicious interruptions, once for all. "Chip in again, either whelp of you, before your turn is called, and I'll act, not talk!"

"Fa'r play's any man's right!" grunted Tom Haller.

"An' you shell hev it, Mose," grimly nodded Garl Orton. "I'll do the talkin' back, ef any's called fer, you all understand."

"I ain't axin' no more'n what I giv' them—a fa'r, squar' shake, an' plenty o' time to patch tha'r lies together," apologetically bowed the accused; then continuing: "An' as fer them two gentlemen who hired me to play guide, I say ag'in that they ain't now nur never was any ways c'ected with the Internal Rev'nue sarvice. I made dead sure o' that afore I said I'd show 'em the way up the Ozarks."

"It's a p'izen hard job to hev to stan' up

afore so many o' them I've lived 'long of all the years o' my life, 'cept the time I was into the army," he added, his voice sounding as grave and troubled as his massive face looked, while his big eyes moved slowly from face to face of the Hillers who were sitting in judgment over him. "A monstrous hard job, as I started to say, neighbors, but—it'd 'a' bin a powerful sight harder ef I hedn't a clean record to pint back at!"

"I'm a mossback born, bred an' by trainin', jest as my pap, an' his dad afore him, an' all the way back to the fu'st startin'—mossbacks from head to tail, start to finish, fu'st to last—which is me! Ef ary one o' us hed to set up a saint to say our prayers to, it'd look like Andy Jackson! Ef ary one wanted to hate his own self to death, he'd git all ready an' vote ary other ticket then the straight, dyed-in-the-wool Dimmycratic, Mossback-Bourbon ticket! But I'm proud to say that sech a disgrace never yit ketched up 'ith a Mossback Hunter!"

A cheer broke from the Hillers, low at first, but swelling until those hollow regions rumbled and roared with the sound-waves. They might be a little slow in picking up other points, but not on this.

Mossback Mose waited until silence was restored, then added:

"As I set out to say, I'm a mossback clean through. You all know that I hate any an' all things c'ected 'ith the rev'nue sarvice wuss then a 'coon hates dirt on his grub. You know that I'd shoot a own brother, ef I hed one, an' ketched him 'ith sech a cur's collar on his neck! An' so, bein' this, I give you my word of honor as a man, a neighbor, a soldier who fit until the last ca'tridge was bu'sted, that those two gentlemen in yender ain't rev'nue spies, nor up hyar huntin' fer secret stills!"

"May I ask a simple question, Garl Orton?" blandly smiled Uriah.

Mossback Mose nodded assent, and the judge passed it on.

"Are you willing to place yourself on the same footing with the two gentlemen you are so boldly defending, Moses Hunter?"

"Which?"

"Are you willing for these neighbors to rank you with those two gentlemen: to stand or fall with them? Are you willing to make oath that neither of them is more or less guilty than you are?"

"Yes, ef I kin make out jest what you're tryin' to git through ye. I say I'm no more guilty then they be o' playin' spy. I say they're no more guilty than I be o' tryin' to sell my neighbors."

"That will do, Moses Hunter," bowed Uriah Sparks, stepping briskly forward and handing Garl Orton a couple of papers. "The rest lies with you, judge. Ask the accused how he explains what's in these papers!"

Garl Orton caught his breath sharply as he drank in the nature of this fresh evidence of treachery. For there, in plain print and almost as plain writing, lay a commission as deputy marshal, made out in the name of Moses Hunter!

"Perhaps 'twould save time if you were to read those two commissions out loud, so all can hear and comprehend," said Uriah Sparks, at his old trick of rubbing his hands together. "I'd have done it myself, but the deputy marshal might have claimed that I was making it all up as I went along. Drowning men are said to catch at straws, and hanging knaves will clutch at air!"

"Whar'd you git these papers?" harshly demanded Garl Orton, his face almost as gray as his hair and beard, with powerful emotion.

"I took them from the breast of Robert Kendrick, when I knocked him down, over yonder!" boldly cried Perry Sparks, all aglow with his vicious triumph.

"An' I see'd him doin' of it!" growled Dick Branch, who had kept remarkably quiet since his humiliating experience with the fighting pigmy.

Several other voices chimed in to the same effect, and even Garl Orton remembered catching a glimpse of what looked like papers, in those moments of intense excitement.

Once again those ugly, menacing murmurs grew to a sullen roar, as Garl Orton made known to all the nature of this fresh evidence: as it seemed fairly proven that Mossback Mose was a deputy marshal, under Robert Kendrick, who had all necessary authority for destroying stills and arresting moonshiners.

But through it all Mossback Mose never flinched, never quailed, standing with arms folded over his massive chest, a cold, half-sneering smile lighting up his strong features. And never a word spoke he until Garl Orton, quelling that storm by his stern authority, turned an inquiring look upon the accused mountaineer.

"What hev ye to offer ag'in' all this, Moses Hunter?"

"Jest plain, simple truth, jedge," bowed the Bald Hornet. "As a starter, putt Perry Sparks onto his oath as to whar he got them papers."

"I took them from the person of Robert Kendrick, as these good and true men have borne witness!" was the bold response.

"An' you take your oath that them is the very papers you tuck out o' his breast? Them an' no others?" persisted Hunter.

"Those identical papers. I found no others."

The answer came prompt enough, but Perry Sparks turned ghastly pale as he met that peculiar gaze: it seemed to chill his blood, and warn him that he had wrought out far more than he had intended. But he had gone too far to retreat. He must conquer or—fall!

"That's all I want o' you, Perry Sparks," turning toward Garl Orton and handing him another paper, which he took from his own bosom. "Look at that dockymint, Uncle Garl! That's the treasure-map. That's the paper Perry Sparks tuck from the gentleman he hit down from ahind, like the cowardly whelp he is! That an' no other!"

"It's a lie!" fairly howled the young mountaineer, but subsiding as Garl Orton made a stern gesture.

"But—what's the meanin' o' these other papers, Mose?" asked the moonshiner chief, sorely puzzled by these rapid changes.

"They're forgeries, made up by Perry Sparks," was the instant reply. "His pap may hev hed a finger in fixin' 'em up; he ain't none too good fer sech dirty work, anyhow!"

"Lies against truth!" laughed Uriah Sparks, scornfully tossing his head, seemingly far more amused than put out by that blunt insult. "Anything to cheat the gallows! But—shall it work, men of Ozark? Will you permit a self-convicted spy and traitor to triumph over you in this shameful manner? No, I say! Ten thousand times over—no!"

But the swift response for which he was playing, did not come. The Hillers were too utterly bewildered to act swiftly. They were wholly at a loss what to think, and silence reigned once more at Garl Orton's stern command.

"The more we try to git at the bottom o' this case, the thicker the mud 'pears to ryle up!" the giant moonshiner growled, gazing from accused to accusers, then back again. "You say that this yer' is the paper Perry Sparks tuck from the critter, Mose Hunter?"

"I'll take my sacred oath that's the very paper Perry Sparks tuck from Robin Kendrick," earnestly responded the mountaineer.

"Then—how did you come by it?"

"As you kin see, that paper's the very treasure-map I told you all about; the same I was follered to St. Louey for, the same I was slugged an' left as dead, fer! An' bein' that same—bein' the only clew to a pile o' money big 'nough to make a man rich fer life—would Perry Sparks resk keepin' it whar it mought be showed up by a s'arch?"

"Waal, sca'cely! An' so he throwed it off in a corner, fer the dark to kiver, while he changed them other papers fer it, countin' on makin' you all see a hangin' matter in 'em—no less!"

"I swear that all he says is a lie!" snarled Perry Sparks.

"Drap it—drap it all right hyar an' right now!" thundered Garl Orton, springing to his feet. "Thar's one way we kin git at the bottom facts, anyhow! Come help tote in them two cussed spies!"

He snatched up a blazing brand, and strode back to where the two bound men had been left. Had been—but were no longer!

Both Kendrick and Price had vanished, leaving no sign behind!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MOONSHINER'S DAUGHTER.

IN order to make one or two obscure points perfectly clear, it is necessary to go back a few steps, and explain just how Mossback Mose happened so opportunely on the scene, and how he came to be so well-armed against the scheming Sparks, father and son.

This was owing to Ruth Orton, the brave girl who had risked so much to save her father from staining his honest hands with human blood.

Ruth had been taking turns with her mother in watching over and caring for Mossback Mose, on whose the antidote to the noxious drug, known throughout the Ozarks as "Devil-weed," was having as favorable effect as could be hoped for.

Being relieved from duty by her mother, Ruth ventured down to the cavern where the secret still was located, knowing that Garl Orton had gone thither, and longing to know if anything had been seen or heard of the two men suspected of being revenue spies.

Ruth reached the spot just when Dick Branch made his first mad rush upon Owen Price, and like a true child of the mountaineers, she lingered to watch that seemingly unequal struggle, rather than fleeing in fright.

She was a witness of all that followed, and only the intense confusion that reigned for a few moments prevented her indignant cry from being heard by other ears.

She saw Perry Sparks rob Kendrick, and distinctly saw him fling the paper away, into a dark corner, substituting others for that one. And instinctively divining its importance, Ruth risked discovery, to steal forward in the shadows to gain possession of the document.

She did this, covered by the confusion already noted, and with the paper securely tucked away in the bosom of her dress, she hastened back to the house, entering by one passage just as her

mother left by another: the front door. A glance showed Ruth that Mrs. Orton was going to the spring for water, and she turned at once to the chamber in which Mossback Mose had been installed.

Greatly to her joy, Ruth found him awake and in full possession of his senses, though very weak from the poisonous drug. Not for long; her hastily spoken words acted like magic on the mountaineer, and taking the paper so luckily secured, Mossback Mose armed himself and left the cabin by the secret passage leading down to the cavern.

Ruth followed him, though without his knowledge. She was so agitated that she dreaded the questions Mr. Orton would surely ply her with. That was her sole reason for retracing her steps, and nothing was further from her thoughts, just then, than what she shortly afterward performed.

Hoping, yet fearing, longing yet doubting, she was drawn nearer the scene where the three men were in danger of their lives, despite her better judgment. Garl Orton loved her, but he could be stern, even cruel, when he deemed it his duty. Yet—she *must* learn whether Mossback Mose could avert that threatened murder!

Thus it came that, unseen herself, Ruth Orton was a witness of the removal of Kendrick and Price, the fact that the Sparks, father and son, demanded that removal, sending a thrill of delight through her frame.

She rapidly studied the situation, and firmly believing that if time enough was gained, Moses Hunter could prove not only his own innocence of all wrong-doing, but also make clear the harmless nature of the purpose which had brought those two strangers into the Ozarks, she had only to count the cost.

"They proposed it! They insisted upon it! They came to see that their wishes were fully carried out! Then—can they hold father to blame?"

That was the main point, and it took only a few minutes to convince Ruth that no harm could come to her father through her actions.

With her, to resolve was to act, and creeping silently through the dark, Ruth soon reached the two captives, softly whispering:

"I'm a friend. For Heaven's sake—and your own—not a sound to alarm your enemies over yonder!"

"You are—Miss Orton?" softly muttered Kendrick, instantly recognizing that voice, subdued though it was.

"Silence! even a whisper may ruin all—and seal your fate! If I set you free—if I cut your bonds so you can walk—will you swear, on honor, to obey me without question? Don't speak—see!" as she felt for their up-turned faces in the dark. "If you swear, lift your heads a bit—twice!"

Kendrick moved his lips first; for that warm, trembling hand had touched them, thanks to the darkness. But then, as though impelled by the same spring, the chums gave the signal indicated.

"I will trust you. I must—or risk your death!" murmured Ruth, unsteadily, as she opened a penknife and felt for the stout thongs confining their lower limbs.

The ropes fell away before that keen edge, and Ruth carefully gathered up the fragments, making sure that nothing remained to tell how the prisoners had been set free. Then she silently gave the signal to arise, taking hold of the arm nearest her; which proved to belong to Rob Kendrick.

"If your limbs are benumbed, wait until you can use them without making a sound. Then I'll lead you to—to safety, at least for the present," the maiden cautiously whispered.

Fortunately for her nerves, there was no necessity for delay. The bonds had been well applied, but captivity had not lasted long enough to seriously impede the circulation of blood; and both men promptly signified as much.

Then, bidding Price guide himself by keeping touch with his chum, Ruth led the two men away through the darkness, until at a safe distance from the spot where Perry Sparks was bringing his charges against Mossback Mose, and through him, against Kendrick and Price.

"Now, before we go further," whispered Ruth, coming to a halt and shifting her position until she could clasp an arm each of the men, "I want you to pledge me your word as gentlemen that you will never, by word, deed, look or hint, betray the manner in which you left that spot, unless I have first given you permission. Will you do this?"

"I pledge you my word to that effect, Miss Orton," instantly replied Kendrick. "And I'll swear for Owen Price as well."

"I'll swear for myself," curtly said the pigmy. "I promise."

"And that you'll never speak of the place to which I'm thinking of taking you; the only place in all the Ozarks where your worst enemies can never find you?" persisted Ruth, her voice growing a bit less steady.

This pledge was given as promptly as the other. Why not? To remain in the power of the Hillers meant almost certain death. No matter what lay before them under the guidance of this young woman, it could not be a worse fate.

Ruth hesitated a few moments longer, but then, with a hand on an arm of each, she slowly, cautiously moved forward through the utter darkness, pausing once or twice to caution them against moving to either side, lest they trip and fall.

It was a rather trying journey, for their arms were still bound behind their backs, and in case of accident they would be utterly powerless to help themselves; but knowing that even worse lay behind them, the chums obeyed each impulse, each low warning, waiting for the end with what fortitude they could summon.

No doubt the utter darkness made that journey seem longer than it was in reality, but a considerable distance was covered before the end was gained. And then, by the dim light sifting in through several cracks in the rock-wall, the two men found themselves in a small chamber, dry and airy.

One glance around to note their surroundings as accurately as that uncertain light would permit, then both men turned to look at the young woman who had come so opportunely to their rescue.

"Not a word!" she hurriedly murmured, recoiling a pace and shrinking from their gratitude, even before it could find expression in words. "I must get back before your absence is discovered, or all will be lost! You will remain here—"

"Yes, I reckon we will," dryly muttered Owen, his mustaches curling.

"You have only to tell us what you wish us to do, and we'll carry out your instructions to the very letter, Miss Orton," earnestly said Kendrick, giving a kick back that cracked sharply against Owen's skin.

"I have only to say—wait; wait and try to hope," said Ruth, increasing the distance between them, but pausing at the narrow entrance by which the chamber was gained. "But—on your honor as men! are you revenue spies?"

"We are not, as Heaven bears witness!" earnestly declared Kendrick.

"Then—I'll save your lives if a poor, weak girl can!" impulsively cried Ruth, as she vanished from their sight.

For a few moments neither man moved or spoke. Then Owen said:

"Were you in earnest about coming up here treasure-hunting, Rob?"

"I certainly was; but why do you ask?"

"Well, don't you reckon that you've discovered a treasure, if not exactly the treasure you came on this wild-goose chase for?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

MOSSBACK MOSE TURNS HIMSELF LOOSE.

GARL ORTON was the first to discover the absence of the prisoners, as he led the way with a blazing brand, but he could not trust the evidence of his own eyes, staring around in what, under less exciting circumstances, would have been ludicrous dismay.

"Done gone! But whar—how?" he gasped, recovering sufficiently from the first shock to glare around in quest of some sign by following up which the mystery might be solved.

"It's an infernal trick to cheat us out of our just vengeance on the devilish spies!" hoarsely cried Perry Sparks, turning fairly livid with strongly conflicting emotions.

"Rope the critter as done it!" hoarsely howled Dick Branch. "Run 'em down an' haul 'em up all in a bunch!"

"Who—who could hev done it?"

Garl Orton spoke like one in a dream, just then, as he stared stupidly around over those intensely excited faces. For the time being he was completely dazed, unable to think or reason.

But he had unconsciously touched a match to the train, and the explosion followed an instant later.

"Who—who but Mossback Mose?" snarled Uriah Sparks, gesticulating furiously, fairly beside himself with rage.

"Ay! Mose Hunter helped 'em off, and we're worse than curs if we don't take pay for all out of his treacherous hide!"

"'Course he done it—Mossback did!" howled Dick Branch, doing his little best to back up those who were making an open attack on the mountaineer whom he hated quite as much as he feared.

Up to that moment Moses Hunter had not spoken a word, though he looked fully as much surprised as any of his fellows when the prisoners were found to have vanished. He looked at each speaker in turn, and had they been less blinded by disappointed fury, they must have taken warning from his glittering eyes, his flushing face, his swelling chest and his clinching hands.

Then—
"Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip-z' spat!"

Louder than a thousand hornets "on a swarm" that furious warning rung out, and then the Bald Hornet leaped straight at his enemies.

"Keep a-pokin' 'til ye woke me clean up eh?" he howled, sweeping those who chanced to stand between him and the Sparks aside with his left hand and arm, tumbling strong men over like grass before a gale. "Chuck rocks at my nest an'—down ye go!"

Dick Branch was the first to suffer, being nearest. The burly moonshiner tried to dodge, saving his already battered face, but catching that heavy fist on his shoulder with a force that sent him headlong across the passage.

Perry Sparks leaped back with a vicious curse, whipping forth a revolver and firing a snap-shot, just as Mossback Mose lunged forward and caught Uriah Sparks in his mighty grip.

"Buzz-zz-z-zip-zip-z' spat!" roared rather than hummed the Bald Hornet, whirling the screaming, terrified old rascal clear of the ground and hurling him bodily against Perry, who was trying to end all by a more deliberate shot.

"I'm murdered—I'm—"

Down went father and son together, and repeating his fantastic slogan, Mossback Mose followed up his advantage, kicking and striking as best served his ends, having all three of his worst enemies in a tangled heap, their own frantic struggles but adding to his advantage.

All this took place with amazing rapidity, and the three men were down, wholly at the mercy of the aroused mountaineer, before even Garl Orton could give a cry of warning.

"Don't shoot—don't hit—pull 'em 'part, fer God's sake!"

He sprung to the side of the raging giant, and flung his arms about him, but they were torn away with hardly an effort, and only a swift ducking saved his head from that terrible blow.

"Don't—Mose—be a man!" he cried, rising up and renewing his generous attempt to save others from what he feared would prove death before that terrible rage could be smothered.

"Uncle Garl? Did I hit ye?"

Not another man within those four walls could have faced Moses Hunter just then, without suffering for his temerity; but the instant that face and voice were recognized, the giant mountaineer calmed down.

"Watch out!" cried Tom Haller, leaping upon Perry Sparks and knocking up his newly armed hand.

"I'll kill—he's murdered my father!" snarled the young mountaineer, viciously striving to free his arm from that stubborn grip.

"Some o' you—dug-gun pokes come—stiddy, all!"

Sturdy Tom Haller tripped his adversary up, the heavy fall helping him secure that weapon without another shot being fired.

By this time the cooler-headed Hillers had recovered from their surprise and momentary panic, and the four men who had taken part in that brief but lively scene, were under guard, Branch and the two Sparks being disarmed as surety against any more reckless firing.

It took a few minutes to do all this, and to ascertain that no one had been hit by flying lead, and nothing worse than bruises had been inflicted by the Bald Hornet on his enemies.

"What'd I want to do more, fer?" asked Mossback Mose, with a sneer of utter contempt.

"When I take to killin', it's men I pick out, not skunks an' blow-adders!"

"Shet trap, Mose Hunter!" sternly interposed Garl Orton, once more himself. "Git down to business, men! While these dug-gun fools hes bin pullin' ha'r, an' we're watchin' 'em doin' of it, them infernal spies is pullin' out fer tall timber!"

"Whar you reckon they could 'a' gone, Orton?" asked Haller.

"They's on'y two ways they could 'a' got away from whar we left 'em' trussed up: an' them two ways you-all knows about jest as well as I kin tell ye," surlily growled the angry moonshiner.

"One o' them's up through your cabin, o' course, Orton?" hesitated another of the Hillers.

He could not believe that any one connected with his chief would stoop so low as to lend an accused spy aid or assistance, and his embarrassment found birth in that hot flush which leaped into the face of the giant moonshiner, not in suspicion.

"That's one way they mought 'a' got out, but—I don't reckon they's any one byar as reckons I'd favor a spy, that way?"

"But mebbe Ruth—" began Dick Branch, only to have his speech cut short by a fierce slap across the lips as Garl Orton sternly cried:

"You shet, Dick Branch! Fetch my gal's name into this squabble, an' I'll break ye in two pieces! An' ef any o' the rest o' ye dast even hint that way, I'll—"

"The spies are gone," spoke up Perry Sparks, with forced calmness. "They could not have disappeared without help. Who has stood up for them through thick and thin? Who has perjured himself in hopes of saving them from justly merited punishment at the hands of those whom they are dogging, spying on, hunting down like mad wolves? Who, I ask you all, men of the Ozarks?"

"Who but Moses Hunter!" snarled Uriah Sparks, from the edge of the darkness beyond the fire.

Their only answer came from Mossback Mose, who laughed derisively before saying:

"Did Mose Hunter say fer the two men to be toted out yender in the dark? Was it Mose Hunter that stuck up to give them a chance to slip off while you was howlin' an' chawin' soap an'— Go soak your heads, critters!"

"Mossback couldn't 'a' done it, but *somebody* did," curtly interposed Thomas Haller, now, as ever, cool and clear-headed. "An' while you're spittin' ugly words back an' forth, them fellers is pullin' foot fer kiver!"

"Haller's right, an' we want to settle down to work," hastily added Garl Orton. "Thar's only the two ways out o' this, as ye all know. One is back thar, an' up to the trap inside o' my cabin. T'other is by sneakin' past us an' the fire, 'long the rocks, jest thar."

"It don't look likely they could, but we was so dug-gun busy lookin' on at the sparrin' match 'twixt—"

"Git lights an' settle down!" harshly interrupted Orton, picking up his rifle and a lantern, lighting the last by the fire. "Mose an' Tom Haller, you come 'long 'ith me. Rest o' you kin s'arch the other two ways out. Ketch 'em ef you git a sight, but—*ketch 'em alive!*"

"If any one felt that a more equal division would be proper, no one saw fit to make the suggestion, and in company with the two men whose names he had called out, Garl Orton passed the spot where the prisoners had been left helpless in their bonds, sweeping the light of his lantern over every foot of the ground lying between those rock walls.

"It's monstrous queer how they worked loose!" muttered Mossback Mose, his brows wrinkled with honest perplexity, though there was a glow of mingled relief and pleasure in his eyes. "Yit—I'm powerful glad it happened, ef only to give you all time to come to a jest view o' the matter. They ain't spies, Uncle Garl!"

"Then they'd hev sight better hev stuck it out, like honest men!"

"Would they hev hed an honest show, Uncle Garl?" pointedly asked the big mountaineer. "Wasn't the boys nigh ready to make *me* pull a rope? Then what show would strangers hev stood?"

Garl Orton made no reply, other than a surly growl, deep down in his throat.

They began the steep ascent which led to a concealed trap-door in the little kitchen leaning against the main cabin. Garl Orton pushed this trap up and was followed by his companions into the room above, where they were greeted by a silent, almost grim gaze from the light blue eyes of Nancy Orton.

"You're a plum' fool, Mose Hunter, ef ever I see one!" she snapped, with a frown. "You'd ort 'o be in bed, flat o' your back, 'stead of—"

"Hes ary two men come through this way sence Mose come down, Nancy?" interrupted Garl Orton.

"What sort o' two men?"

"Two critters we ketched up fer spies, an'—"

"I hev'n't see'd hide nur ha'r o' no two spies, nur no two men o' any sort," turning away with a parting sniff of disapproval at her recent patient. "They ha'n't no two men come through *this* way."

Garl Orton followed his wife through the door connecting with the main, or living-room, his troubled eyes resting on the pale but composed face of his daughter.

His lips parted to question her, but something in that swift, glowing, appealing look closed them again. His head dropped a bit, but he passed on by the girl without a word.

Hardly knowing what he expected to discover there, Garl Orton looked into the two chambers opening off from the main room; first into that where Mossback Mose had been restored to consciousness, then into Ruth's chamber. Neither room was occupied, and with a dull, uneasy feeling that all was not right, yet unable to fix his suspicions on any particular point or person, the giant moonshiner sunk into a seat, burying his face in his hands, like one giving himself up to deep and serious reflection.

None of the others ventured to disturb him, for some little time, nor would they have done so then, only for what they rightly deemed a necessity.

"The boys is comin' up this way, Orton," said Haller, tapping those bowed shoulders. "An' from the way they're sprawlin' tha'r selves, I reckon they ain't b'illin' over 'ith good-humor!"

The giant moonshiner caught up his long rifle, without which he seldom was seen afoot, and strode to the open door, glancing keenly over the approaching party.

They were the men who had separated to search the other passages for the accused refugees, and prominent among their number he made out Dick Branch and the Sparkses, father and son.

"Ye come like ye was in a rush, neighbors; what's wanted?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STIRRING UP THE MOUNTAIN LION.

It might have been through pure force of habit, but as he called out those words, in clear, sharp tones, Garl Orton flung forward the muzzle of his rifle until it commanded the party, his right hand covering the lock, so that a motion would set trigger and lift hammer.

The Sparks saw this, and Uriah shrunk back behind the burly form of Dick Branch, but his son showed more grit. He caught sight of

Mossback Mose standing just back of Orton, but even that did not alter his purpose in leading the moonshiners up to the cabin front.

"The same old business, Orton," he said, coolly. "We didn't find the runaway spies in the cave, and we knew that they couldn't have passed out that way."

"How did ye know?"

"Because they couldn't have passed out without leaving some sign behind. I reckon you've forgotten how it rained last night!"

"Waal, they must 'a' went out yen' way ef they went at all, fer they never come through the trap, in hyar."

"Then they must be hid in the passage, back of that trap," doggedly persisted Perry Sparks, coming closer, only pausing when Orton half-lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"Don't be in a rush, Perry Sparks! What ye reckon to do?"

"Put a guard over this end while we search the passage, if we don't find the spies in your cabin!" was the bold retort.

Mossback Mose uttered an angry sound, but subsided as Garl Orton gave a stern shake of his leonine head.

"Didn't I tell ye they wasn't no spies hid under my ruff?" slowly asked the moonshiner.

"I don't say they *are* there, with your knowledge, Orton," answered Sparks, in a slightly less offensive tone. "But I *do* say that they never came out at the other end of the cave. I do say that they are in the passage between the still and your cabin, or else they're hidden inside your house."

"Whar's the rest o' you?"

"Back keeping guard over the entrance. I timed them, and as we close in from this end, they'll sweep all clear from that side. Now—will you play white, Garl Orton, and give us a fair show?"

"What do ye 'low to do?"

"Search your cabin first, then all that lies beyond it!" was the dogged response. "If those two devils escape us now, they'll come back with an army to break up the still and arrest every man-jack of us!"

For a few moments Garl Orton stood like a statue, gazing slowly from face to face. He saw only sullen, dangerous frowns, and he knew that further barring the way would surely destroy his power over those rough, turbulent spirits.

"Say the word, Uncle Garl, an' I'll set out on a swarm!" sharply whispered Mossback Mose. "I kin clean out the gang, an' never blunt my stinger! I kin—"

"You shet! Thar's bin heap sight too much fightin' mongst neighbors a'ready. Ruth!"

"Yes, father!"

"Come 'ith me, Nancy?"

"I'm not fur off, Garl Orton."

"You keep a watch that Perry Sparks nur his pap don't slip none o' your spoons ur sech-like truck into tha'r pockets, while pertendin' to hunt fer spies."

"Do you dare insinuate that we'd steal?" snarled Perry Sparks.

"I ain't afeared o' your takin' the stove, fer we hain't got none," was the cool retort, as Garl Orton crossed his threshold and sat down on a log not far from the door, with a gesture placing Ruth at the end furthest from where the searchers would have to pass, in order to reach the cabin.

"I'll get even with you for that, be sure!" growled the young man as he beckoned his fellows to follow him.

"I'll be right hyar when you come back, Mr. Sparks," bowed the giant moonshiner, with almost painful politeness. "Mose?"

"Can't do it, Uncle Garl!" laughingly cried the Bald Hornet, twirling the cylinders of his regained pistols, to see that they were in good working condition. "I'm bound to go along, to see that they don't pull the hole in a'ter 'em!"

Perry Sparks passed this mock by without notice, doggedly sticking to the task he had set for himself. He was showing an amount of sullen grit such as few had ever given him credit for possessing, up to that hour.

He knew that after what had taken place, he must win a complete victory over all three of his enemies, or suffer the consequences. The entire Ozark Range was far too small to contain both Mossback Mose and himself after that day's work.

His sole frail hope, apart from recapturing and hanging or shooting the two men whom he had denounced as spies, lay in casting a cloud of suspicion on Garl Orton, and thus turning the moonshiners away from their chief, to back himself up in the fight to come.

It was for this express purpose that he took the risk of stirring up that mountain lion, and persisted in closely searching the cabin from corner to corner, before passing on to the trap door through which access could be had to the cavern in which their still was located.

Of course he made no such discovery as he longed for, rather than expected to make, and he was in a sullen, evil humor when he led the way through the steep passage under the rear of the cabin.

Mossback Mose kept him close company, flinging out an occasional veiled taunt, though un-

der his light, mocking manner lay a stern resolve should the refugees really be discovered.

He himself had no means of knowing where his late employers were hidden, though he felt fairly confident that Ruth had assisted them away from the spot where they had been left in bonds. He could think of no place along that passage where they could have sought refuge, even while knowing that they must be somewhere below ground.

He was sure of but one thing: if his friends were discovered, he would save them from arrest, even though he had to fight the whole gang of moonshiners. As for Perry Sparks—he should surely die the first of all!

Fortunately for all concerned, matters did not reach that extreme point. The search was fruitless though it seemed impossible for even a rat to have eluded those keen, prying eyes. And when the spot where Mossback Mose had stood his examination was reached, the party under Perry Sparks met that left to examine the other passage.

They had seen nothing of the missing spies. And amid a storm of vicious curses, Perry Sparks turned about to again scour those dark crooks and turns.

As before, without success. Not a sign was found which could lend them encouragement, and and at length the young mountaineer was forced to admit what his mates had long since grown convinced of: that their game had indeed escaped them.

"They must have passed on through the cabin!" he snarled, almost beside himself with rage and chagrin. "Some one helped them off, so far, but I'll find them—and I'll find out *who* helped the devils!"

"You'll find one devil, be sure," curtly said Mossback Mose, as they paused under the trap door. "But I'm doubtin' ef he'll ever let ye come back on airth to make your report!"

"Don't crow too loud, Moses Hunter, for you haven't cleared your own shoulders of treachery, as yet!" snarled Sparks, as he sprung through the open trap, and strode through the cabin to its front.

Garl Orton was sitting on the log, just as he had been left, only puffing slowly at his corn-cob pipe. He grimly smiled as he saw they had returned with empty hands, then drawled out:

"Waal, hed fun 'nough to pay ye fer yer trouble, Sparks?"

"We've found out that those cursed spies could only have slipped us by being guided up through your cabin, anyway!" was the surly reply.

"Ef you say that, you're a dirty, lyin' whelp o' Satan!" cried the now thoroughly angered moonshiner, gripping his rifle with fingers that seemed strong enough to bruise wood and dint steel. "Ef you dast to even hint—Stiddy, Perry Sparks!" his rifle rising to a level as the angry young man moved a hand toward a pistol. "Stir a finger afo' I give ye leave, an' I'll kill ye too dead to skin!"

"Give me half a chance, and I'll—"

"That's jest what I'm gwine to give ye, dog! Do ye see that white rock tha's got a bit o' moss onto it like a criss-cross, clost to the trail ye come up a bit ago?" he added, describing a stone that stood something like a hundred yards distant from his present position.

"Waal, I'll give ye jest while it takes me to draw twenty puffs o' smoke, to git t'other side o' that rock. Ef ye don't—I'll shoot ye quicker'n a cat kin wink in a holy hurry! Now—*skoot, ye devils!*"

"Run—run, son!" spluttered Uriah Sparks, ghastly with terror, setting the example himself.

Perry Sparks dared not linger, for he read death in those blazing eyes, but he was ashamed to actually run. And so—the rifle cracked, and with a half-stifled yell, Perry Sparks fell headlong close to the cross-marked stone!

CHAPTER XXIX.

GARL ORTON'S MARK.

URIAH SPARKS was the first to reach and pass the cross-marked stone in safety, then turned to again urge his sulky son to greater haste. As for the other Hillers, they had fallen away from the direct line, to either hand, knowing that the mountaineer could hold no particular grudge against them.

Perry Sparks was too angry to run, leaving out his pride; but he was walking briskly, gaining in pace with each passing moment. He could not really believe that Garl Orton would shoot, yet—

The report rung out, and with a fierce cry Perry Sparks clapped a hand to the side of his head, falling headlong almost against the white rock pointed out as the turning point of safety.

Uriah Sparks beheld that fall, and forgot himself for once in his selfish life.

"You devil! You've killed him! You've butchered my gallant boy!" he screamed, shaking his clinched hands toward the giant moonshiner, who had risen to his feet and was swiftly reloading his weapon.

He forgot the dead-line which he had betrayed such ludicrous haste to cross. He forgot

all else save that the one being on earth whom he had ever loved, was lying there in a quivering heap, shot down by that pitiless demon whose strong face was even now contorted by a broad grin of mingled satisfaction and derision.

"You grinning devil!" fairly howled Uriah Sparks, pausing by the side of his son to again shake his skinny hands at the giant moonshiner in fierce imprecation. "I'll eat your heart if you've murdered my brave boy! I'll hunt you down to the galows, if it costs me—"

"Oh, shet!" scornfully interrupted Garl Orton, slipping a cap on the nipple of his rifle. "Button up ontel ye know what ye're tryin' to talk 'bout. Ef the p'izen critter's dead, pure skeer killed him, not my lead. I jest marked my pork, to know it ag'in when wanted."

Uriah Sparks was bending over his son, seemingly lost to all else, but Ruth ventured to murmur:

"Are you sure, father? He cried out so sharp that—"

"Him?" with a sniff of unlimited contempt for the young mountaineer. "Perry Sparks'd yelp out ef a skeeter was to bite him!"

By this time Uriah Sparks learned enough to change his death-wail a note or two, for his "gallant boy" was rapidly regaining the wits which had been pretty well scattered by that stinging bullet and the stone with which his skull had come into violent contact.

"Scrabble on past the rocks, sonny!" hoarsely muttered Uriah, covering the younger rascal with his own person as much as possible. "That devil is loading up again. Crawl—hurry—for—don't shoot!" he fairly howled, leaping erect and flinging up his empty hands as a backward glance showed him Garl Orton lifting his long rifle.

"Git past that dead-line, all two both o' ye!" harshly thundered the moonshiner. "Git apast it, I tell ye, or— Halt!"

That stern command was promptly obeyed. Both father and son had received a lesson which neither would be apt to forget in a hurry, and as long as they were within the range of that rifle, they would not openly rebel.

They were past the cross-marked rock, but at that stern order, they turned, with hands held above their heads.

Perry Sparks was bleeding freely, though his wound was more painful than serious or deep: the bullet had plowed up the skin along his cheek as it passed on to neatly clip the lobe of his left ear!

"I've putt my mark onto ye, Perry Sparks, but I've changed the meanin' of it sence I hed to putt it to sech low-down use. That mark means—keep as much room atwixt you 'nd me as ye know how!"

"I'll have your heart's blood for this, you devil!" sullenly growled the young mountaineer, mechanically feeling of his mutilated ear, gazing at his bloody fingers for an instant, then flinging the drops in the direction of the cabin.

"It'll take more'n your yelpin' to skeer me to death, Perry Sparks," grimly chuckled the giant moonshiner, then adding in cold, stern tones: "Skin out o' this, ye mongrel cur! I've mighty little funder use fer sech truck, an' the less ye try to crowd, the longer ye'll likely live! Git, afore I take a sudden notion to crap t'other year!"

Gaining wisdom by rough experience, the Sparks, father and son, beat a retreat, bottling up their wrath until more nearly out of range of that long rifle.

"It's jest them two dirty whelps I'm flingin' out hints to, you understand, neighbors," Garl Orton said, in placable tones, as the Hillers likewise began to move away. "I'm as hot fer ketchin' them two strangers as the best among ye, but when it come to sech low-down trash tryin' to rub it in a'ter spittin' in the face o' me—waal, I jest hed to kick!"

"We'll ketch the durn spies ef we hev to turn the intire Ozarks bottom-side-up!" growled one of the moonshiners.

"Good luck go with ye, Morton! An' I reckon mebbe you'd better go help, Haller," turning with a short nod in the direction of that sturdy fellow. "Do what ye kin to fetch the critters back alive, fer we'll git heap sight mo' satisfaction out o' hangin' or shootin' men what's bin tried an' proved guilty."

"Reckon I'd best foller up, Uncle Garl?" asked Mossback Mose, after a little hesitation.

"Not ontel we kin drive a bit mo' Devil-weed out o' ye, Moses Hunter!" grimly interposed Mrs. Orton, coming forward with a steaming hot decoction of the no less famous antidote.

"It's heap sight p'izener to the taste, Aunt Nancy!" said the Bald Hornet, with an exaggerated grimace of aversion.

"Mebbe you'd like it better ef I was to chuck it at ye in a bottle o' whisky, pore critter!" frowned the woman, though a faint twinkle in her eyes betrayed the fact that she was not nearly so stern as she tried to make appear.

Mossback Mose flushed hotly at that thinly veiled insinuation, but he knew that he deserved it all, and was honest enough to admit as much.

"But I've sworn off, now, Aunt Nancy," he added, meeting her doubting gaze with frank eyes. "I'll never tetch a drop o' whisky until I've run down an' punished the cowardly cur as

doped my drink with Devil-weed! I sw'ar it—an' I drink the pledge to ye in this dose!"

"I'm hopin' ye'll keep it—better'n young men keep most o' tha'r say-so's," stiffly bowed Mrs. Orton, waiting for the bowl. "'Tain't sech a monstrous wide range ye'll hev to kiver in that s'arch, Moses."

"Sweeter than honey, an' smoothen then ile!" declared the giant mountaineer, relinquishing the bowl with feigned reluctance, smacking his lips after the nauseous draught. "But—why ye reckon so, Aunt Nancy?"

"Beca'se I was born with common sense, an' growed up 'bout losin' of it all. Beca'se it don't take sech mighty smartness to see which way the wind blows, when it rams both eyes o' ye full o' sand. An' so—ef ye shoot at Dick Branch an' hit Perry Sparks, it'll only take one more ca'tridge to wipe out the hull score!"

"Keerful—don't drap the bowl, Aunt Nancy!" cried Mossback Mose, flinging his arms around Mrs. Orton and planting a kiss on her faded but still comely face, loud enough to rival the explosion of the cartridge she had just alluded to.

"Hold fast to your head, critter!" snapped Aunt Nancy, swinging her free hand around and bringing it against his ear, with a force sufficient to upset any ordinary man.

But Mossback Mose only laughed merrily, and Mrs. Orton turned away to hide the smile that came into her face, while Garl Orton, once more seated on the log before the cabin, called out in dry tones:

"When ye git through 'ith the ole woman, Mossback, mebbe you'll be good an' 'bligin' 'nough fer to come out an' tackle the ole man?"

"Which shows how hard a critter ye be, Uncle Garl," dolefully drawled the young mountaineer, crossing the threshold with feigned reluctance. "Won't give a pore devil any show! Hev to take the sweet taste 'way afo' he hes time to—"

"You shet, Mose Hunter!" snapped Mrs. Orton, in pretended anger.

"Mo' of the wasp then honey-bee, I reckon," grimly chuckled the moonshiner, slipping along the log to make room for Hunter. "Set down. I ain't clean fergot that ye're sick a man, yit. Ef I hed— How did ye work the trick, Mossback Mose?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Hunter, with a start, seemingly bewildered by that abrupt change of voice and matter. "Which? How?"

"That's pritty nigh what I said, yes," grimly nodded Orton, gazing fixedly into the face of the younger mountaineer. "How did ye manage to work the trick, 'thout ary one o' us all smokin' ye until 'twas everlastin'ly too late! How?"

"Ef you mean how did I help them two strangers git away, Uncle Garl, I tell ye now, what I told ye down yender, that I never tuck part nur lot in doin' of that. It's jest as big a mystery to me as it kin be to you, an' you know full as much as I do whar they've gone to."

Mossback Mose spoke calmly, deliberately, his eyes frankly meeting that keen, searching gaze. And Garl Orton knew then, what he had felt from the start, that the spies really owed nothing of their freedom to Moses Hunter, so far as actual work was concerned.

"But that ain't jest what I'm tryin' fer to git at, Mossback," he added, with just the shadow of a smile flitting across his rugged face. "I knowed you hedn't ary chance to set 'em loose your own self, fer I kep' ye full in the sight o' me from fust to last. But—who was it done the work while you kept up a-talkin' as kiver to it?"

"I've told ye all I kin, Uncle Garl."

"'Cept how it come you got down yender at sech a monstrous lucky time—fer the spies," grimly laughed the moonshiner.

Mossback Mose hesitated for a moment, but then doggedly replied:

"It jest happened so, Uncle Garl. I felt it in my bones that I was needed down yen' way, an'—so I went thar!"

"'Thout nobody tellin' ye what was up?"

"Nobody never said a word, one way or t'other!"

Garl Orton gave a nod of grim approval before saying:

"That's right! Durn a man that wouldn't lie for the sake of a gal! Ruth!"

"What is it, father?"

"Mose won't talk, so reckon you'll hev to take his place. I want to know how you found out what was gwine on down yender?"

The maiden slowly drew nearer, plainly using the moments to consider what or how much she ought to confess. Garl Orton read her thoughts, and quietly added:

"I ain't axin' ye fer a fairy story, Ruth. I want the hull truth, from A to ampersand, an' ef you ain't ready to give it that way, jest button up an' go back to your own room. Understand?"

"If there's any blame, I'm the one to shoulder it, remember, sir," earnestly cut in Mossback Mose, his face growing cold and stern.

"You shet! I'm talkin' with my gal, jest now. Waal, Ruth?"

The moonshiner's face looked hard as granite, but Ruth saw something in his eyes that encouraged her, and she told her story without

reserve, up to the time of her rousing Mossback Mose to a full sense of the peril menacing his employers.

Garl Orton seemed particularly interested in her description how Perry Sparks secured the treasure-map from Kendrick, afterward casting it into a corner where the shadows would cover it until he could regain possession.

"The p'izen whelp wasn't reskin' so much onto him own self, fer fear it'd come down to a giner'l s'arch, I reckon!" muttered Garl, in explanation. "We all see him take somethin' like pa pers; an' ef the man he robbed was to kick ag'inst them Perry showed, what else could they be? I reckon that was the idee of it all!"

"I wasn't jest fitten fer fight or reasonin', eyther," said Mose, after Ruth had explained how she carried him the news of his employers' peril. "But I couldn't lay thar like a log an' let honest gentlemen suffer fer what they wasn't guilty of; so—I jest went it blind, on little honey's recommend, ye see! But—whar them two critters went, an' the how of it—gits me bad!"

Garl Orton chuckled softly for a moment before saying:

"I kin guess at the how, but don't hev to at the whar. Eh, Ruth?"

CHAPTER XXX.

GARL ORTON TAKES COMMAND.

"YOU'RE not so very angry, daddy?" murmured Ruth, her arms creeping around the moonshiner's neck, her rosy cheek nestling lovingly, coaxingly against his face as she stood by his side.

"Waal, don't you reckon I ought to be b'ilin' over? To hev a gal o' mine kiver her pore cle dad all over 'ith dirt? To hev my own kin turn traitor? Ain't that plenty 'nough to sour any critter?"

Garl Orton scowled ferociously, but even Mossback Mose was wise enough to rightly interpret that bright twinkle in his keen gray eyes. Ruth knew that he was not mortally offended, but she could not resist the temptation to make doubly sure.

"I was acting against traitors, daddy! Perry Sparks and Dick Branch deserve that brand a thousand times more than either of those two—strangers!"

Mossback Mose was glancing rapidly from one face to the other. He saw that the worst was over, and relieved on that point, his curiosity grew almost unbearable. Since no particular harm could come to Ruth from speaking out in plain words, he blurted:

"How did ye manage the trick, Ruth? Whar did ye take the lads to? An'—ef I don't ketch hold, blamed ef I don't reckon I'll bust!"

"I'll putt a couple o' hoops onto ye rather then hev the do'-yard all mussed up that-a-way, Mossback. An' you, gal, go pack up a lunch. An' fill my ole canteen 'ith fresh water, will ye?"

Ruth turned away with a light step, and the moonshiner began slowly filling his pipe afresh. Mossback Mose dropped down to his former position on the log, choking back his burning curiosity as best he might, knowing that Garl Orton would reveal just as much or as little as he saw fit, no matter what arguments were used to hasten him.

Not a word passed between the two men, up to the time when Ruth called out that she was ready. Even then Hunter did not stir from his seat, until Garl Orton, having entered the cabin, called back:

"Ye kin come, ef ye like, Mose. Mebbe we kin dodge the pieces ef you should happen to do that bu'stin' act."

"Jest as soon go 'long 'ith you as anybody else, Uncle Garl," yawned the mountaineer, stretching his mighty arms sleepily.

Ruth laughed softly, her eyes gleaming, her cheeks aglow. Now that all seemed going aright, it took very little to amuse her.

Garl Orton led the way through the trap, followed by the young people, Mossback Mose relieving Ruth of the basket, which she had liberally crammed with substantial viands.

Orton did not light his lantern until after the bottom of the steep flight of steps cut in the solid rock was reached. Then, with a sign which his companions interpreted as meaning silence, he led the way at a brisk pace, asking no questions of Ruth, but moving onward with the air of one who knows just what lies in advance.

Only once was that silence broken by aught save the dull echo of the men's heavy boots. That came in a low ejaculation of surprise from the lips of Mossback Mose, as he followed the lead of Orton across a narrow ledge of rock, on each side of which yawned a dark, deep abyss.

He, in common with all the rest of the Hillers who knew aught of the cavern, believed that the narrow strip of rock ended abruptly against the wall beyond; but by the light cast back from Orton's lantern, he now saw differently.

The narrow foot-rest took an abrupt turn, leading around a shoulder of rock, into a narrow passage wholly invisible from the other side of that knife-edge bridge.

This was the only really dangerous part of the journey, though there were many crooks and

turns to be threaded, with an occasional rift or passage leading into the otherwise solid rock on either hand.

Mossback Mose had discounted a surprise, but this was even more than his wildest surmisings had pictured forth.

"We are friends, gentlemen!" called out Ruth, in clear, slightly tremulous tones, as they drew near to the secret chamber in which she had so hurriedly left the two adventurers. "Be kind to them, daddy!" she added, coaxingly, as she pressed closer to the side of the giant moonshiner.

Garl Orton made no response, for the narrow crack through which admission was gained, now showed up in the light of his lantern, and from the sounds beyond it was clear that the two refugees had heard that cheering call.

"Waal, strangers, ye didn't run so mighty fur, a'ter all, did ye?" gruffly spoke Orton, pausing just inside the entrance, holding up his lantern so as to cast its beams squarely upon their faces.

"Well, we couldn't go any further in this direction, without starving a month or so," coolly said Price, shrugging his shoulders as he cast a glance toward the narrow cracks in the stone wall, through which came the last rays of a declining sun. "Call again in a week or so, and maybe you'll change your tune."

"Quiet, Owen!" frowned Kendrick, casting an uneasy look past the moonshiner, whose giant form effectually blocked the way. "You can hardly blame us for trying to give that crowd the slip, sir, after the manner in which we were treated."

"I ain't sayin' I blame ye, strangers. Only—who helped ye off?"

"No person. We helped ourselves. If blame there be, the blame is ours, and ours alone!" quickly responded Kendrick, his face turning a bit paler, but his eyes unflinchingly meeting that keen gaze.

"Don't—father!" implored Ruth, her voice so shaken as to be hardly recognizable even to those anxious ears.

"Come in, critters," chuckled Orton, stepping aside. "An' I ain't countin' ye any the wuss fer hevin' a lie like that so mighty pat onto the tongue o' ye, stranger!"

"He's clean white, ef he hes got a kinder rough bark, gents," laughed Mossback Mose, drawing a knife and swiftly setting their hands at liberty. "Know each other, gents!"

He gave them an off-hand introduction which served all purposes, but Ruth held back, blushing divinely, until he took her by the hand and gently forced her to come forward.

Owen Price made short work of his part of the introduction, then fell to investigating the contents of the basket and canteen. First satisfying his fierce thirst, he contentedly curled his legs up for lack of a more comfortable seat, took the basket into his lap, and fell to eating after the manner of one who thoroughly appreciates a good thing when fortune casts it in his way.

Kendrick, on the other hand, seemed far more desirous of gaining the good-will of this grim Hiller, and without waiting to be questioned, frankly revealed his name, his past and present position, together with the object which led to his venturing into that region.

Almost from his first words, Garl Orton betrayed a deep interest in all the young man had to say, and well content that matters were taking such a favorable turn, Ruth and Mossback Mose fell back, waiting for the end.

When Kendrick ceased speaking, Orton questioned him closely concerning his parentage, nodding repeatedly while learning that Robin was the son of Colonel Gordon Kendrick, who fought on the Southern side during the Civil War. His eyes dropped quickly when Rob spoke of his father's death in battle, and one hand stole up to thoughtfully smooth his shaggy beard.

"I reckon I knowed your pap, young man. I fit into his rijimint in more'n one red-hot fought. An'—knowin' the father, I'm a heap sight mo' ready to b'lieve the son ain't nigh sech a black-hearted whelp as Perry Sparks an' his dad tried fer to make out!"

"I pledge you my word of honor that I am no spy," earnestly said Kendrick, meeting that keen gaze without flinching. "I'm ready to make oath to that, by the bloody grave of my honored father!"

"It don't need; Kunnel Kendrick's boy couldn't turn out a pizen spy. It's clean ag'inst natur'! An' ef I've done or said ary thing as hurt the feelin's of ye, boy, I'm axin' his pardon, double times over!" earnestly cried Orton, his eyes sparkling all the brighter for an unusual moisture that stole into them.

"I thank you—and your daughter, Mr. Orton. Only for her—"

"You'd 'a' croaked, an' I'd 'a' hed a turrible load onto the mind o' me when I come to find out *what* Kendrick I hed a hand in killin'!" gruffly interposed Orton, turning his back to the light.

"Then—they are free, father?" timidly ventured Ruth.

"They're free fer all o' me, but we've got to think o' others, ye want to keep in mind," hur-

riedly answered the moonshiner, picking up his lantern and turning toward the entrance. "You kin explain what all tuck place out yender, Mose. An' keep 'em hid in hyar ontel you git word from me ag'in. I'm gwine—I'll be back, when I kin!"

"She'll go with ye, or—"

"No. Ruth kin lead ye safe back. Take yer time. As fer me—I'm off!" quickly responded Orton, leaving the little refuge without time for further speech.

He quickly retraced his steps, too deeply buried in thought to note when he passed a crouching figure, armed with a bared knife.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SPY AND HIS SENTINEL.

YET such an armed figure was there, crouching close to the rock wall in a dark angle, where Garl Orton was obliged to pass him by almost within arm's length.

Death to one or the other would certainly have followed discovery under the circumstances, and it was almost incredible that the giant moonshiner passed along without making that discovery. In his ordinary state of mind, he would never have done so, but just now he was lost in thought, food for which had been given him by Rob Kendrick during those few minutes of earnest talk.

Not until the moonshiner with his lantern had vanished around the next turn, did that spy venture to slacken his fierce grip on the haft of his knife, or draw in a full breath.

"'Twould 'a' bin him or me!" he muttered, brushing an unsteady hand across his sweat-dampened brow. "An' ef I hedn't cut 'im off so sharp he couldn't 'a' let out a yelp, them devils in yender—ugh!"

Dick Branch broke off with a curious growl, combining fully as much personal fear as intense hatred for at least one of the persons included in that hardly complimentary term.

It was hardly more than a chance that led him to his present position, where he was in possession of rather more information than he knew exactly what to do with.

In spite of their fierce anxiety to recapture the two men charged with being revenue spies, the Hillers could not entirely forego their coarse jokes when such a favorable subject presented itself; and if he had not been so thoroughly whipped already, Dick Branch doubtless would have had half a dozen chances to get thumped to his heart's content.

He had not realized how thoroughly the fighting pigmy had spoiled his claims to good looks, until he caught a passing glimpse of himself in the small mirror hanging against the wall as he followed the lead of Perry Sparks through Orton's cabin.

That one glimpse was enough!

His brain whirled, his bruises tingled and smarted as though some one had suddenly bathed them in whisky and salt. No trouble to guess why Ruth turned away with a little shiver of—was it pity?

From that moment Dick Branch mentally swore to never again know easy rest until he had terribly avenged himself on both Owen Price and Mossback Mose!

During all that close search by the moonshiners acting under lead of Perry Sparks, Dick Branch was racking his brain and twisting his wits toward that one end: revenge!

Perry Sparks deemed it wisest to leave a man to guard each one of the exits from the main cavern, and Dick Branch offered himself as willing to stay, not caring to again pass before those blue eyes until he could partially renovate himself.

Thus it chanced that he caught sight of the lantern when Garl Orton paused to light it, and noting who were his companions, and the basket carried by Mossback Mose, a suspicion of the truth flashed across his sluggish brain.

Dick Branch, forgetting personal fear in his lust for revenge, removed his boots and stole silently after the little party, to his intense amazement seeing Orton melt into the very face of the rock!

He began to realize the truth, however, when Uncle Garl paused to send the rays of yellow light back around the angle, and by the time both Ruth and Hunter had vanished, the spy felt able to perform the same feat, even in the dark.

Under different circumstances, or had not Garl Orton formed one of the party, Dick Branch might have hesitated before running such a risk; but, he knew that only the plainest proof would convince the Hillers that their long-time chief had played them false.

The spy passed that point of peril in safety, though he did not dare draw a free breath until he again caught sight of that guiding light some little distance ahead, telling him that for so far, at least, his life might be called his own.

He saw Garl Orton lead the way into what appeared to be a mere crack in the rock, to be followed shortly by Ruth and Mossback Mose. He strained his ears to the utmost, and caught the sound of other voices: to lose them again as a savage joy fairly set his brain to buzzing, singing, roaring!

He knew now where the spies had fled, and he knew, too, who had aided them to escape.

"Now I hev got ye, Ruth Orton!" he growled below his breath, his eyes glowing with fierce joy. "An' ef ye don't sing low when I crook my finger, I'll make ye the shame an' p'intin'-stock o' the Ozarks!"

Prudence and a longing to hear what those people were talking about behind that rock wall, kept Dick Branch busy for a space, but the wish to make assurance doubly sure finally won. He crept forward, hand on pistol, knowing that only desperate fighting could save him in case his spying should be suspected. He did manage to catch a few words, but Garl Orton was the speaker, and those words revealed his purpose of leaving the chamber at once!

Ghostly with fright, Dick Branch beat a retreat, but with the darkness and his ignorance of the right course against him, he saw that the giant moonshiner must surely discover him by the rays of his lantern unless he could find a hiding place, and that right speedily.

He did the best he could with the few seconds left him, but, as elsewhere stated, only Orton's preoccupation shielded him from discovery.

When that danger was fairly past, Dick Branch again dogged the moonshiner, fearing to lose sight of the light until he had placed that dangerous passage. This made out, he paused long enough to steady his nerves, making the sharp turn in safety, and then hastening on just in time to catch another glimpse of Orton ascending the steps to the trap-door opening into his kitchen.

"Whar's he gwine in sech a hurry, an' whar's he gwine fer?" Dick Branch asked himself, when he saw the lantern extinguished, then the trap-door open, to close again behind the moonshiner. "Ef I'd on'y bin clost 'nough fer to hear jest what they said! Ef—waal, hain't I got the hull dug-gun outfit right whar I want 'em? Hain't I?"

He gave a low, vicious laugh, then turned back to where he had discarded his boots, pulling them on and making his way back to where he knew there was at least one Hiller on guard.

It did not take him long to cover the distance, but during that brief interval he had time to decide pretty fully what he must do. And though he would rather have chosen a man more prejudiced against both Orton and Mossback Mose than this guard, he dared not lose any more time than was strictly necessary.

"Stiddy, you!" sternly cried out the moonshiner, lifting and cocking his rifle with a single motion as he caught sound of those hasty footsteps approaching his position. "I'll riddle ye like a—"

"It's me—Dick Branch, Bill Trainor!" hastily cried the spy, recoiling a pace, startled by his own peril.

"Come out whar I kin ketch a squar' glimps' at—waal, Dick, the next time you run up ag'inst my muzzle, you don't want to do it!"

"I didn't think—I'm all on fire, Bill!" panted the excited mountaineer, his eyes fairly ablaze. "I've found out whar them two cussed spies hes gwine to!"

"No!"

"An' I know who helped 'em off, too!" added Branch, calming himself by a desperate effort. "An' ef you'll do as I say, we'll ketch the hull cramoodle o' the p'izen critters—we jest will!"

"I'm in with ye, ef—kin we han'le 'em though?"

"We don't need to tackle 'em our own selves, ef you'll 'gree to keep keen watch while I go fetch the rest o' the boys. Will ye do it?"

"Why wouldn't I?" his jaws squaring, his bullet-head nodding emphatically. "Hain't I got as much to lose as ary one o' ye, ef them imps gits off? Hain't I got a woman an' kids an'—"

"But—ef them you've al'ays tuck to be clean white was holpin the spies git off? Would ye do yer sworn duty *then*, Bill Trainor?"

Something in his manner and looks startled the guard, but he nodded his head positively. And knowing how much he had at stake, Dick Branch was in too great haste to waste more time in leading up to his really marvelous discovery.

In a few words as possible he told what he had discovered, giving it as his opinion that the spies were to be kept in that hiding-place until the search grew negligent, then were to be run out of the Ozarks under cover of night.

"Ef we let 'em!" he laughed, viciously. "You keep up a keen watch, an' ef ary critter 'cept Ruth, or Mose, or Orton, tries to git out, foller 'em an' run 'em to tha'r new hole, leavin' signs ahind to tell us whar you've gone. I'll fetch Perry Sparks an' the rest o' the boys. We'll hev a hangin'-bee afore day, shore's fire's hot!"

Too eager to pause for an answer, Dick Branch hastened away the moment he saw Trainor rise to change his location for one from whence he could observe any and all persons attempting to pass to and fro between the cabin and the newly discovered refuge.

William Trainor was anything but a brilliant genius, even among the Hillers. It took time

for his sluggish brain to work, and after the exultant spy passed out of sight, he stood staring at vacancy for several minutes.

Up to this hour Trainor had placed explicit confidence in his chief, Garl Orton: the last man in the Ozarks whom he could associate with even the idea of treachery to his neighbors. And as for Ruth—

"Ef she hain't a angel, then I do reckon they never wasn't none sech made in this wide world—no, I don't reckon!" he muttered, with a nod so emphatic that he nearly flung himself forward on his face.

This led him forward, until near the steps leading up to the cabin. He squatted down in the darkness, rifle resting across his legs, chin supported on his hands, doing more sober thinking than had racked his brain for many a long day.

He slowly passed in review all that Dick Branch had revealed. He tried to realize the stupendous fact—if fact it was—that both Garl and Ruth Orton were playing false to the mountaineers. But that was beyond his limited powers.

"It's a dug-gun lie! I don't keer who dast to say it! An' who *does* say it? Dick Branch. An' who dast to back him up into sech? Ole man Sparks, an' Perry Sparks!"

Almost involuntarily Bill Trainor began to contrast the two parties, and in so doing he took the first step which threatened to dash Dick Branch's hopes to the ground.

If only Mossback Mose had been involved, the matter would hardly have troubled the sturdy moonshiner, for he, with many others, had more than once been turned to jest and ridicule by the Bald Hornet. But—it was altogether different with Ruth and Garl Orton!

"They're clean white! They're funder 'bove Dick an' Perry an' the ole man, then the sun is 'bove a tadpole! An' ef they've tuck up 'long o' them two—them two strangers," giving a little gulp at the change of terms, "what's the reason? Why—billy-be-dug-gun ef they *kin* be spies!" smiting an open palm with a clinched fist, sending an echo running through the cavern so clear as to actually frighten himself upon his feet.

He did not resume his former position, though he still hesitated before yielding to the impulse that, little by little, forced him nearer the base of those rudely-cut steps in the rock. As he struck them, however, he gave a low grunt of final decision, and slowly groped his way upward, feeling with one hand above his head until his fingers came in contact with the wooden trap-door.

One last period of doubt, of hasty yet bewildered reflection, then he sharply sounded the well-known signal announcing the coming of an unexpected friend.

There came no answer, and after a pause he repeated the signal. Then, as only silence answered, Trainor lifted the trap and stood erect.

To catch sight of Mrs. Orton, covering him with leveled rifle!

"Stiddy, Bill Trainor!" she said, in low, stern tones.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FRIENDLY EXPLANATIONS.

OWEN PRICE glanced up from his basket of food, at the hasty departure of Garl Orton, but his mouth was entirely too full for speaking at once, and he contented himself with a silent bow by way of leave-taking.

"I say, Kendrick," he *did* say, as soon as he could conveniently. "If you want any dinner, you'd better respond to the bell a little more promptly, for I'm making one awful cavity in trying to fill up another of the same description!"

"I'm sure you must be hungry, Mr. Kendrick," shyly murmured Ruth, looking and acting very differently from the daring woman who had warned them to flee for their lives, on that night of storm.

"Ef not, he ought to be," laughed Mossback Mose. "I never knowed him to wait fer axin's to grub—not while I was cook, anyway!"

"I am hungry, but—"

"Then set down an' git away with anyhow 'nough to keep Price from killin' himself. An' while you're eatin', we'll hev a show to cl'ar up a few things an' p'int which'd orter be puzzlin' ye, even ef they ain't. Set down, man! Ruth'll excuse ye, I reckon!"

Kendrick yielded, knowing, now, that his newly found friend did not intend an immediate fitting; but he hardly enjoyed that meal as much as he did the covert, but perfectly respectful glances which he stole at that really charming face.

"Nothing like treasure-hunting, is there, Rob?" murmured Owen, with a delightfully innocent smile lighting up his face. "Especially when you think you've found it!"

Kendrick flushed hotly, and choked on his first mouthful of food. Owen generously pounded him between the shoulders with both fists, then seriously warned him to take smaller mouthfuls and eat slower!

Mossback Mose fairly roared, and even Ruth laughed softly: not at the sufferer, of course, but at that funny little man.

Though so embarrassing to Kendrick—who inwardly vowed to thrash the little pigmy soundly at the first opportunity—this was a fortunate allusion, since it gave Mossback Mose a fair chance to begin his explanations.

He told how Ruth discovered the trickery attempted by Perry Sparks, and how her cool, steady nerve had enabled him, Mose, to frustrate the rascal's most dangerous stroke. And then, as leading up to the whole affair, he went on to explain his theory of the dangerous plot and its birth.

To begin with, he repeated the account of the robbery by guerrillas, and how, when cornered by Federal soldiers, they concealed the treasure, trusting to regain it in after days if any of their number were fortunate enough to escape with life. That some did escape, was evident from the fact that a map of the place where the treasure was hidden had been drawn up; but whether that treasure had ever been reclaimed, only a careful inspection of the *cache* could prove.

He went on to explain how that map had fallen into his hands, and how many a long day he had spent vainly searching for the money. He told how he had it with him when he went to St. Louis the last time, and how it had been stolen at the time the two toughs assaulted and left him for dead.

"I didn't know it *then*, but now I'm mighty nigh sure that Perry Sparks hired the critters to down me fer the map," he added, his gray eyes glittering wickedly at the thought. "I reckon they played double 'ith him; though, from what follered, mebbe thinkin' they could make a bigger stake by playin' the game out alone. So—waal, you got hold o' the map somehow, an', by a powerful queer chaine, hit on me to act as guide up this way."

"I'm sorry I lost the map, Hunter, but—"

"You kin thank Ruth fer rekiverin' of it, pard," laughed Mose, drawing the paper from his pocket and holding it out toward Kendrick.

"No—it's yours by rights. I feel like a thief when I think how long I kept it from you. Why didn't you tell me, man?"

Kendrick pushed back the extended hand, and the paper fluttered over to Ruth. She caught it up, scanning those dim lines and marks on the older sheet with true womanly curiosity, then giving a little cry:

"Why, Moses! I know this spot!" pointing with an unsteady finger to the point indicated as the one where the treasure had been hidden. "You came in by that very passage, Mr. Kendrick."

Mossback Mose gave a dry chuckle as he caught up the paper once more, and one keen look into his eyes told Ruth the whole truth.

"What did I tell you, old man, when you were howling over the fall of that big rock blocking off our escape that way? Didn't I prophesy then that *one* of us would find a treasure through that very accident?"

"Ef this kin help, it's yourn, pardner," laughed Mossback Mose, once more proffering Kendrick the map. "I reckon it's hoodooed fer me; luck all wore off, totin' it so long!"

"For shame, Moses Hunter!" pouted Ruth, then drawing back as the smiling mountaineer tried to lay a broad palm over her lips. "I will tell on you, sir! Now I know how General Winston came by his share of that money."

"Waal, when a woman will, she will, an' a pore man mought jest as well knuckle, fu'st as last," dolefully whimpered the giant.

Sparkling with animation, Ruth told how General Winston, in company with Mossback Mose, one day discovered a bee-tree, which had a hollow in the lower part of its body, as well as the one in a big limb, near the center of the top, in the last of which holes a swarm of wild bees were discovered.

Mossback Mose insisted on the general's helping cut down the tree, which he did. And there, in the hollow trunk, a large amount of money was discovered.

"Hid out by some o' the g'rillas, war-times, I reckon," meekly mumbled Moses, hanging his head.

"Were *you* a guerrilla, Moses Hunter?" sharply demanded Ruth, lifting his head with one hand while shaking a finger in his face with the other. "Oh, you wicked trickster! To let the poor general—and Mercy, too!"

"I reckon I'd best holler fer mercy, ma'am," dolefully mumbled the giant mountaineer. "Ef you won't tell—tell the giner!"

"I'll not mention a word of it to *him*, but—I'll tell Mercy, the very next time I see her! So there, now!"

"Waal, a lickin' from her wouldn't hurt nigh so bad. But the giner!—glory to the lamb! Ef he was to know how I tricked him, I do reckon he'd jest w'ar out a ten acre lot moppin' me up!"

With an abrupt change of manner, now clearly in earnest, Mossback Mose spoke to the two men.

"I'll hev to ax your promise, gentlemen, never to let out what Ruth just onkivered. I kin trust you, both?"

The required pledge was instantly given, but Kendrick looked troubled as he added:

"Then you found the treasure, Hunter?"

"Waal, yes, I reckon I did."

"And you knew, before leaving St. Louis, that I had this map?"

"Yes, ag'in," with just the ghost of a smile flushing across his honest face. "An' sence we're all doin' a bit o' friendly 'splainin', mebbe I'd best let it all out."

"I didn't know eyther o' ye then, like I do now. I was robbed o' that map, an' the next I knowed it was in your han's. So—waal, I hed more'n hafe a notion that you got it from me, fu'st-off!"

"You thought I was a thief, then?"

"Then, but not *now*," quickly spoke the mountaineer. "Look at it your own self, sir, an' see ef I didn't hev grounds fer doubtin' of ye. An' so—waal, the value o' the map was gone, but the takin' was thar, an' I 'lowed I'd wait ontel I'd hed some fun with ye out hyar, afore tellin' ye the hull story. Kin you fault me fer that?"

Kendrick was forced to admit that he could not, taking everything into consideration. It stung him keenly to have been taken for a thief, but there was a balm in the sympathizing looks which he caught from those lustrous blue eyes. And then, too, it went far toward explaining many things which had both annoyed and puzzled him in the actions of their guide before the climax came that stormy night.

"I only trust that Mercy will forgive you as easily, Moses," said Ruth, when a complete understanding was arrived at by the three men. "To think how shamefully you fooled her father! And I know you forced him to take two-thirds, claiming that it was his just dues, because he was the one who found the swarm! Now—didn't you *make* him find it?"

"Waal, ef I did—why not?" almost roughly demanded the blushing mountaineer, his big eyes all aglow. "Why wouldn't I? Think how he tuck me up, a low-down, mis'able trash! Think how he taught me all I know! Think how—ef I'm a man, *he* made me one! Ef I'm—"

Just then a low, yet strangely powerful moaning sound came floating through the hollow hill, startling all in the "look-out" with its weird, wild echoes, and causing Ruth Orton to spring to her feet with a sharp ejaculation.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HORNET'S SOOTHING BUZZ.

"It's mother calling! Something has happened!"

Even Owen Price was startled by that strange sound, but at this explanation from Ruth, he cast a quick, pitying glance into the pale face of his chum. And if mortal eyes ever spoke in plain language, those of the fighting pigmy then and there expressed immense pity for a luckless fellow whose prospective mother-in-law possessed such a tremendously remarkable voice as that.

"I reckon you're right, Ruth," nodded Mossback Mose, mechanically feeling if his weapons were in place. "Uncle Garl wouldn't be likely to use the talkin'-tube, an' so— We'll hev to leave ye fer a bit, gentlemen, ef ye don't mind!"

"If there is any danger—"

"Not a mite, 'long's you don't try to leave hyar."

"I was not thinking of myself, sir, but of Miss Orton," stiffly uttered Kendrick, flushing hotly.

"Ruth? Oh, we'll manidge right 'nough. You jest stick hyar to the look-out. Don't talk too loud, nur try to take too long a walk. It calls fer a bright light an' stiddy head in a stranger to foller our road."

"Please wait here; if danger threatens you, I promise to bring or send you warning," hurriedly whispered Ruth, a hand gently touching Rob Kendrick's arm.

"Bring it, please. Danger shared with you—"

"Ahem!" coughed Owen Price just at that instant. "I can't let you go, Miss Orton, without thanking you for this feast. Never felt so good in all my life, I do assure you! And—if your cook is a single lady, I dearly wish you would speak a good word for me! I could be perfectly happy with such an angel—of the kitchen!"

"I'll tell Mrs. Orton," grinned Mose, at the same time drawing Ruth toward the crevice. "Mebbe she'll git shet o' Uncle Garl, to make ye happy, Price, but—waal, so-long!"

These parting words had consumed very little time, and it almost seemed as though those peculiar sound-waves were still floating through the hollow hill, when Ruth and Mose turned their faces toward the cabin over the cavern.

Though they were enveloped in utter darkness, Ruth's perfect familiarity with the path enabled them to progress without delay, and knowing that only serious danger or immediate want of help could justify the use of the secret speaking-tube from the cabin, the young couple pressed forward at almost reckless speed.

But familiarity with the perilous points on her part, combined with perfect trust on that of the mountaineer, quickly enabled them both to pass that knife-bridge in safety, when it was the work of hardly another minute to carry

them to the foot of the stone steps leading up to the cabin on the hillside.

There was no stopping to knock, or sound any signal, and Mossback Mose held a revolver ready in his right hand as he shot up through the trap-door—to utter a low ejaculation of mingled surprise and amusement at the scene meeting his eyes.

Bill Trainor was drawn rigidly erect in one corner of the "living room," his hands stretched high above his head and looking as though glued to the wall. His face was crowded snugly into the corner, thus rendering his eyes useless for sight while he maintained that position.

And judging from the grim, pitiless manner in which Mrs. Orton, rifle in hand, was keeping him covered with her cocked weapon, that would last until other pleasure than his own was consulted.

"What is it, Mrs. Orton?" asked Mossback Mose, at the same time giving Ruth a signal which the keen-witted girl readily interpreted as a warning not to betray her presence.

Slipping aside where the moonshiner could not catch sight of her, even should he turn his head, Ruth breathlessly waited.

"Waal, I ketched this critter sneakin' up through the trap, an' as he couldn't give no squar' count o' himself, I—"

"Fer I never got no chaincel!" spluttered Trainor, uneasily shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Fu'st I knowed they was a gun rammed right under—the nose o' me!"

"An' when the pesky critter *did* set out to jabber, he talked so powerful strange—heap sight mo' like a crazy bedbug then a honest human man—that I jest got so bad skeered I didn't know whether I was standin' onto my own two feet or—I jest *didn't*!"

"I on'y told the bald-headed fac's!" declared Trainor, in a muffled howl of impatient disgust, feeling far bolder now that he had a man to deal with, in part at least. "An' ef you don't want to wait ontel Dick Branch comes back 'long o' the hull gang, I reckon—"

"Ye see how he kep' wanderin' in the mind o' him?" interposed Mrs. Orton, her eyes talking to Mose almost as swiftly as her tongue. "Jest as though *we* knowed ary thing how them 'funnelly spies lit out! Jest as though *we* wouldn't turn the hull Ozarks plum' over, ef they wasn't no easier way o' ketchin' 'em back ag'in! The crazy loon!"

While Mrs. Orton was rattling on after this fashion, Mossback Mose stepped silently back to interchange a few hastily whispered words with Ruth Orton, the purport of which is not difficult to guess. Then, partly closing the door between the two rooms, thus giving Ruth a fair chance to act without risking discovery by Trainor, the Bald Hornet laughingly disarmed Aunt Nancy, and gave the moonshiner permission to change his position for one more comfortable.

"Set down a bit, Billy, an' let a critter know jest what's bitin' of ye," he nodded, affably, taking a chair himself. "You set out to say somethin' 'bout Dick Branch, didn't ye?"

"Ef it ain't too late 'long o' Aunt Nancy's—"

Waal, I done the best I knowed how, anyway!" "You come up through the trap, then?" slowly asked Mossback Mose, somewhat at a loss just what to say, or how much to risk while matters were still enveloped in a fog. "You didn't see ary thing o' them two critters as skipped out so turrible funny, I don't reckon?"

"No, but Dick Branch swore *he* did!" "Then Dick Branch swore to a lie: which ain't likely to've strained eyther his throat or his conscience: he's so mighty used to sech!"

"That's jest what I chucked at the critter my own self!" eagerly nodded Trainor, his face lighting up. "I knowed it *couldn't* be, when he swore that Orton, and Ruth, an' you—he crammed in *you*, mind ye, Mossback!"

"I'll cram in part o' me: my fist, in his lyin' mouth: the next time I meet up 'with the critter!" indignantly exploded the Bald Hornet. "But what did he *say*? An' how come he to say it to *you*, Billy?"

Now feeling far more at ease than he had at any time since receiving that startling announcement, Bill Trainor told all that Dick Branch had confided to his keeping, and then, as part apology for having even listened to such treason against his chief and his chief's daughter, he explained why he had come to the cabin.

"Fer I knowed Dick was lyin', from A to Ampersand! But—waal, *you* see'd how oneasy the boys all was. An'—mebbe some on 'em'd be jest fool 'nough fer to kick up a muss over Dick's lies. An' so—I reckoned it'd be nothin' more'n right fer to let the boss know what the dug-gun fool 'lowed to do."

During this hasty explanation, Mossback Mose keenly studied the moonshiner, and though he felt fairly convinced that Trainor could be counted on to help them, as against the Sparks-Branch combination, he was too shrewd to place unnecessary trust in any outsider.

In a few, well-chosen words, he showed Trainor how utterly preposterous that pretended discovery had been: how worse than mad any one would be to even dream that Garl Orton would wink at, much less help the accused spies in their escape.

"Ef you don't want to turn out a laughin'-stock fer all the Ozarks, Billy, jest keep buttoned up! Jest you lay low an' let Dick Branch play the dug-gun fool as fur's he likes, 'thout your help."

"I'd lick him for a cent!" frowned the Hiller. "The likes o' *him* tryin' to make a dug-gun fool out o' *me*!"

"You acted white. You done jest what any honest man ought to 'a' done. An' when I tell Uncle Garl, he'll say the same. But—tell ye what I'd do ef I was in your place, Billy. I'd go back to whar Branch set me playin' guard. I'd wait right thar fer him to come back. An' when he *did* come, I'd jest leave him to play fool to the eend!"

"Cain't I lick the p'izen cuss?"

"'Nother time, mebbe, but I wouldn't jest now. I'd sober it out, an' sw'ar that you hedn't see'd nary thing out o' the way—which you hain't, nur won't, likely! I'd jest tell the plum' truth, 'cept holdin' back your comin' up hyar to let Uncle Garl know."

"I ain't 'shamed o' doin' that!"

"You'd ought to be proud of it, Billy!" declared Mossback Mose, rising and motioning Trainor to follow. "But Dick'd ketch at that as a 'excuse to git out o' the blame o' foolin' the boys, don't ye see? He'd be jest whelp 'nough to sw'ar *you* was holpin' us git the spies clean away! Don't ye see?"

Trainor saw, or thought he did, which amounted to the same thing. And while he was passing through the trap-door, Mossback Mose found time to whisper to Ruth:

"Fetch 'em both out—in the dark, Ruth! Start fer the giner'l's house, an' I'll meet ye, comin' 'round t'other way!"

A nod told him that the brave girl fully comprehended his meaning, and with a considerably lightened heart Mossback Mose hastened to rejoin Bill Trainor, lighting the lantern as he descended the steps.

He kept Trainor in talk as the best cover to the movements of the moonshiner's daughter, and had the satisfaction of feeling that Ruth was on her way even as the two men with the light passed by the turn which she must take to reach the look-out.

"Whar did Dick tell ye to squat?" asked Mossback Mose, when near the spot where the two accused spies had been left in bonds, before that startling disappearance.

"He never said jest whar, but I was to keep nigh 'nough to see ef ary pusson tried to go from the hidin'-place to the cabin, or t'other way," a little dubiously responded Trainor.

"Hidin'-place?"

"Whar he saw—or *said* he saw—"

Mossback Mose broke into a low, mocking laugh, more plainly than words telling how incredulous he was at the idea of there being such a thing as a secret chamber in the cavern, after their long acquaintance with every foot of the ground covered by that vast roof.

"The blamed critter must 'a' lost what little sense he ever hed! Mebbe that little fightin' critter punched it all out o' his head! But you wait right hyar, Billy, and do jest as I told ye: tell the plum' truth as to all you've see'd or heard, when Dick axes ye. But—waal, I don't reckon tha'r's any use in givin' him a show to come back at ye by talkin' 'bout how you went to the cabin."

Mossback Mose kept up his flattering, soothing talk until he felt certain that Ruth had conducted the two chums safely from the lookout to the cabin, then he briskly added:

"Waal, reckon I'll be gwine. Ef I was to the fore, mebbe Dick'd try to squarm out o' it, when the pinch come; an' I want to git him pinned down to solid facts. Then—waal, Billy, ef they's 'nough left o' the whelp a'ter I'm done with him, you kin do a bit o' punchin' on your own hook! The idee! Dick Branch tryin' to sell *you* fer a fool!"

"Dug-gun the warmint!" indignantly snorted the angry moonshiner.

"Pay-day's comin', Billy, an' you jest keep on your guard. An' ef you *should* happen to sight them spies—waal, you know how to shoot!"

With a light, merry laugh, Mossback Mose strode away with his lantern, heading for the usual exit from the cavern. When fairly out of Trainor's sight, he extinguished his light, stowed the lantern away in a safe place, then ran swiftly through the dark to join Ruth and their friends.

Night had fallen by this time, but he had a pretty fair idea just where Ruth would be waiting for him, and he found no difficulty in joining the little party. He hastily explained to the chums, and then they bade Ruth adieu for the present, it being deemed best for her to return to the cabin. But before the three men had gone fifty rods, a sharp, stern challenge rung out on the night air.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNHEEDED WARNING.

"STIDDY, thar! Talk up, or down ye go!" Now, one of Mossback Mose's reasons for leaving the cavern as he had, was expressly to ascertain whether or no their enemies had left other men on guard to detect any attempt at flight on part of the two prisoners who had so

mysteriously disappeared just when they had seemed the most helpless.

With all his keenness, he had been unable to detect any such spy or guard, but at the first word of that challenge, his heart leaped into his throat, even as a revolver leaped from its holster. But only for one second: then he quickly cried:

"Don't blizzer, Uncle Garl. It's only jest—"

"You, is it?" muttered Garl Orton, drawing nearer and peering into each face in turn. "What's set ye afoot this time o'day?"

Drawing aside where there was less risk of discovery from prowling foes, Mossback Mose hastily but clearly explained what had happened, adding:

"I reckoned they'd be safer over at the giner'l's, anyway, Uncle Garl. Even Perry Sparks won't dast to sneak in thar—dug-gun him!"

"I reckon you're right, Mose," nodded the giant moonshiner, then drawing the Bald Hornet a little apart to whisper a few hurried sentences in his ear. "Hev 'em lay pritty low, an' I'll see ye afore long, I'd go now, only I want to be thar when Dick Branch comes. Say, Mose?"

"Waal, Uncle Garl?"

"Did ye ever meet up 'ith sech a hog as Dick? Licked by this gent. Licked by you. An' now—waal, three times is the charm, I've hearn folks say!"

With a grim, dry chuckle the moonshiner gave the three men a parting wave of the hand, then strode briskly on toward his cabin.

He had just returned from the home of the Winstons, where he found father and daughter ill at ease. Although Mercy, under escort of their old negro servant, had started that morning to pay a visit to Ruth, uneasy despite herself over the report that Moses Hunter had returned from St. Louis without coming directly home, she had been forced to abandon the thought, thanks to the work of the storm. Fallen trees and gulches full of water formed barriers impassable for either her or the aged African.

Without actually telling a lie, Orton had quieted her worst fears, and having settled the doubts which had urged him to make that flying visit, he was on his return to his home when he met the little party, as described.

Orton reached his cabin without meeting any one else, and once there, hasty explanations were given and received. A few blunt compliments from his lips gave Nancy Orton far more pleasure than she permitted her rather stern countenance to reveal, and knowing that she would sturdily back him up in all things against the enemy, Garl Orton filled his pipe and settled down for a comfortable smoke while waiting for the next move from the following of Sparks and Branch.

That was not long delayed. They caught the sound of approaching footsteps, but no one stirred until, a few seconds later, a heavy pair of knuckles tapped upon the door.

Garl Orton rose and flung the barrier wide, but nearly filling the aperture with his giant form, one hand gripping the butt of the rifle lying in the hollow of his left arm.

"You, is it, Dick Branch?" he slowly asked, as he recognized that burly figure and battered countenance at the head of half a dozen moonshiners. "Did ye fergit ary thing when you was hyar last?"

"We've come to fetch somethin', anyway, Orton," growled the rascal, putting on his boldest front.

"What do ye want?" "To make 'nother s'arch fer them cussed spies! That's what!"

"I tell ye now, what I told ye afore: they ain't no spies eyther under my ruff, or back in the hill."

"It's easy to say sech things, Mr. Orton, but—"

"Wait a bit, Dick Branch," coldly interrupted Orton, taking the pipe from between his teeth and casting it behind him. "That sounds powerfully like you was givin' me the lie!"

"You're pritty nigh the last man I'd want to tell that, Orton," with a poorly hidden sneer underlying his grim smile. "But I *hev* knowed jest as good, jest as white, jest as honest men as you to make a mistake whar they never thunk o' sech a thing!"

"All o' which means—*what*, Dick Branch?" "That I know—jest *know*, ye mind? That I jest know them two p'izen spies is hid back in the cave!"

"Ef you say that, Dick Branch, you lie—under a mistake heap sight bigger'n the one you 'cused me o' makin'. An' now, I tell you all—*an'* you in p'tic'lar, Dick Branch—that they ain't nobody in the cave, onless you've sent some o' your critters thar your own self."

"Then why be you henderin' of us takin' a quiet look?"

"I ain't jest henderin' of ye. But—*afore* ye cram in, Dick Branch, write down one p'int on to the brain o' ye. I ain't a man as hunts fer a quarrel, but ef you stick to this insult, I'll find one; an' you'll hev to hold up t'other eend, ef you kin spell able!"

"All right!" recklessly cried Branch, entering as Orton moved to one side. "I'll run even that mighty resk! I'm a'ter them cussed spies, an'

I'll hev 'em ef every Orton in the Ozarks howls ag'in it!"

Orton said no more, but laid aside his long rifle and picked up a lantern, which Mrs. Orton lit at his nod. This he handed to one of the moonshiners, then followed the lead of Dick Branch through the trap, down the steps, and over to where Bill Trainor was stolidly keeping guard.

Dick Branch sprung ahead of the others as he came within sight of his sentinel, eagerly questioning him as to the results of his watch.

"Hain't see'd hide nur ba'r of a mortal man 'ceptin' only Mossback Mose, sence you told me to keep all eyes open, Dick," stolidly declared Trainor, but with his sleepy eyes sparkling a bit as he uttered this laboriously studied up truth.

Not that he had any conscientious scruples against lies, as such, but there was a peculiar pleasure in deceiving Dick Branch by sticking to the simple truth.

"You're dead sure they hain't no critter passed back ur fo'th, from thar to yen' way? No critter, male ur female, mind?" eagerly persisted the now exultant knave.

"Not a soul, man nur woman, dead nur yit a ghost!" positively asserted Trainor, firmly believing he was still sticking to the truth.

"Then—we've got 'em! Got 'em, dead sure!" laughed Branch, all aglow with evil passions, as he snatched up the lantern and led the way at a run to the point where he had made such an unexpected discovery, a few hours before.

"Thar hain't no way through thar, man!" frowned one of the moonshiners, angrily, as Branch cast the light across the knife-bridge.

"Durned ef I don't reckon he's gone plum' crazy!" cried another.

"Playin' crazy won't save him from a lickin', ef he don't make his brags good," grimly chuckled Orton.

He was the only one who failed to show or express surprise when Dick Branch revealed the means of passing beyond what had seemed a solid rock wall, and after this passage was effected, which consumed considerable time, owing to its difficulties, the moonshiners appeared to place far more confidence in their present leader than at first.

Just as their confidence in him waxed, that which they had for so long placed in the giant moonshiner appeared to wane.

They began to see how it was possible for the bound men to have eluded their hot search, provided some person acquainted with that secret refuge had seen fit to lend them a hand.

"Don't git in too big a rush, boys," grinned Branch, again going back far enough to cast his light around that sharp angle. Thar's a kippie mo' gents as may want to see a bit o' the fun, sence they've bin to a powerful sight o' bother in workin' it up, so fur!"

"Who's them?" quietly asked Garl Orton, standing at ease, seemingly the most unconcerned of all those present.

"Right this way, mates!" called out Branch, encouragingly. "Ruther ticklish place fer to git over, but thar's plenty 'nough on this side to pay big fer the resk an' trouble!"

Presently Uriah Sparks slipped around the angle, his face ghastly with fright, yet too eager to reap the full reward of their dangerous schemings to hang back, now success seemed fully assured.

Perry Sparks quickly followed, then Dick Branch again took the lead, with those two congenial knaves close to his elbows, one and all eager for the end.

"They're right in beyand that crack, boys!" fairly howled Branch, casting his light upon the narrow entrance to the look-out. "In with a rush an'—down 'em fer keeps!"

He set the example himself, followed by the Sparks, then the other moonshiners, while Garl Orton brought up the rear. Leaped in—only to recoil with a howl of vicious rage and chagrin!

And Orton gripped him by the neck, covering the two Sparks with a revolver.

CHAPTER XXV.

A WELL-TRIMMED BRANCH.

"STIDDY, the both o' ye!" thundered the giant moonshiner, holding both Perry and Uriah Sparks under his weapon, by swiftly shifting it back and forth. "I'll shoot the fu'st critter to tech finger to weepin'!"

For an instant or two that terrible grip on his neck, from behind, those sinewy fingers seemingly trying to make their ends meet through skin, flesh and bone, fairly paralyzed the burly moonshiner; but as he recovered from the shock sufficiently to realize his peril, Dick Branch made a desperate effort to tear himself free.

"No ye don't, ye whelp!" growled Orton, shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat, while replacing the revolver in his holster. "Eat dirt, as I told ye it'd be!"

Using both hands, the enraged mountaineer twisted the rascal from his feet and flung him flat on his face. He dropped with knees boring into his back, freeing a hand to pull strong cords from his pocket. And without even a glance toward the Sparkses, he fell to binding those vainly struggling arms behind their owner's back.

Those two schemers were fully as much taken

aback as Dick Branch had been, at finding the secret chamber vacant as they rushed in, and when Garl Orton backed up his harsh commands by that leveled pistol, father and son shrunk back as far as the rock wall would permit.

They would gladly have slipped away while Orton was binding Dick Branch, had time enough been granted them for rallying from that double shock, or if they could have left the recess without actually brushing past or springing over the giant moonshiner. Then, too, there was the knife-bridge to cross—perilous enough with a clear light to show each step, and too blood-curdling to even think of attempting in utter darkness.

All of this Garl Orton seemed to instinctively divine, and while binding and disarming Dick Branch, he did not waste a thought on those two disconcerted knaves.

Tying the last knot, he rolled his prisoner over on his face, lifting a foot to lightly tap those bruised and swollen lips, saying:

"Git onto yer hoofs, whelp!"

"I'll hev yer heart's blood fer all o' this, Garl Orton!" hoarsely panted the maddened mountaineer.

Orton stooped, gripping a shoulder, lifting the fellow to his feet with hardly a visible effort. Then he coldly spoke:

"Whar's them spies ye talked so mighty loud 'bout ketchin', Dick Branch? P'int 'em out, or git ready fer to take yer medicine!"

"You've run 'em off, cuss ye! You an' Moss-back an'—"

An open-handed stroke closed those lips, sending the knave reeling back, kept from falling down only by striking the wall.

"Lie ag'inst me all ye like, but don't dast to lug in the name o' any o' my women-folk, you whelp!" sternly spoke the moonshiner, then turning toward the remainder of the party, sweeping a hand around the little recess to point his words: "Take a look out them cracks, men, an' mebbe ye'll guess why I never told all o' ye o' this look-out."

Obeying, the moonshiners uttered sounds of wonder, if not of complete understanding, for by those means they could gain a perfect view of the valley leading up to the main entrance to the cavern, and could quite easily command that entrance itself.

"I've told ye many a time that I knowed a place whar we-all could hide out ef the rev'nue wolves got too mighty keen on the scent," curtly explained Orton. "An' ef you feel any-ways hard at me fer keeping it secret so long, right thar's plenty reason fer doin' of it!"

He pointed a finger at Dick Branch, his eyes fairly ablaze with angry scorn.

"How long would sech a dirty whelp as him keep sech a secret? Wouldn't he sell that out, ef he was offered a price? Hes he done any better this night, tryin' to sell my life to my frinds an' neighbors, all fer a lie? Him an' sech as Perry Sparks an' his pap!"

"He swore to us that he both saw and heard—"

"I did!" hoarsely snarled Branch, rallying in his extremity.

Garl Orton gripped him by an arm, forcing him through the narrow entrance, speaking in cold, stern words:

"Fetch that light, some o' you. This ain't a fitten place. Then—waal, you kin putt all both o' us on the stand, an' git at the bottom facts."

Once more Garl Orton was undisputed chief. His orders were obeyed without question, not even the Sparkses daring to rebel, by word or action, at least until after that knife-bridge was safely crossed.

Garl Orton thrust Dick Branch ahead of him when the dangerous point was reached, making no pause for the light. It was a taste of punishment little relished by the burly knave, but he was in no condition to struggle or remonstrate.

He had felt so sure of complete vindication and sweet revenge, both in one! He had even expected to catch Mossback Mose and Ruth Orton with the escaped prisoners in that secret refuge. Then—he would hold all at his mercy!

Now—

Thanks to the lantern, no accident occurred, and a few minutes later the party were gathered together at the spot where Mossback Mose had stood for a short time on trial for his life.

Garl Orton kept a hand on Dick Branch, clearly determined not to lose sight of him until their accounts were squarely settled. At his suggestion, a rousing fire was quickly under way, giving ample light for what was to follow.

When this was done, Orton released Dick Branch, slowly casting a grave, serious look into each face of those gathered around before speaking. He coldly, evenly repeated the ugly charges brought forward by Dick Branch, more by insinuation than open words, but none the less serious for that, had they been backed up by proof.

"You-all hearn me tell him, plain an' sober, that they wasn't no spies hid under my ruff nur back in the hill. You know how he stuck to it, even a'ter I told him it'd come to a quarrel atwixt us ef he didn't back up his words clean through. Now—whar's his proof?"

"It's all a p'izen trick to down me, men!" hoarsely snarled Branch. "I sw'ar I see'd Garl Orton an' Mossback Mose an' Ruth Orton go 'crost that place! I follered 'em! I got nigh 'nough to hear 'em talkin' to them cussed spies which they'd hid out in yender! An' I was nigh 'nough to Orton when he left 'em four critters in thar an' passed me by, to tetch him ef I'd dast to stick out my hand. An' so—"

"He set you on gyard, didn't he, Bill Trainor?" crisply interrupted Orton. "Did you see any sech thing? Do you back him up in all this?"

"He lies now, jest as he lied to me fu'st-off!" angrily declared the moonshiner, firmly believing that he was telling the plain truth. "Ef they was thar then, they'd be in thar now, fer never a livin' soul could 'a' passed me 'thout gittin' challenge or a shot!"

"He lies! He's sold me out! I sw'ar to ye, men, that I both see'd an' hearn them very critters in yender!"

"He's hed his say, gentlemen, an' you've hearn him out. As fer me, I'd be ashamed to put in a defense ag'inst sech fool lies. Now—it's fer you to jedge atwixt us; which is guilty?"

There was but one answer. And as he heard it, low but dangerous, Dick Branch lost all hope and tried to flee into the darkness.

"Not yit, critter!" sternly cried Orton, catching him and holding him helpless. "I give ye a full an' free warnin', but you wouldn't take it that way. You done your level best to cover me with dirt—to make my frinds an' neighbors set me up in your shoes—as too low-down, too mean fer decent people to use as a kickin'-post. Now—I'll let ye off easier than I 'tended, fu'st-off, but you've got to take your dose o' medicine, all the same!"

"Men o' Ozark, I'll jest say this much: The critter is too mean to kill, but he's too stinkin' dirty to be let live 'long 'ith white men any longer. So—we'll jest s'arve him like a nigger, an' let it go at that! What say?"

Garl Orton was cheered to the echo, and with a grim smile lighting up his gaunt visage, he looked slowly over those eager, inflamed faces.

"It's a vardict, gentlemen! Who'll be the fu'st overseer?"

"Yar's me!" quickly cried Trainor, before any other could speak. "I'd ought to be fu'st, ef only beca'se the dirty nigger tuck me to be low-down mean 'nough to lie in 'ith him ag'inst honest people!"

No one ventured to dispute that claim, though the majority seemed both willing and eager to take their turns at the flogging. Perhaps they felt compunction at having been led astray so easily, and took this method of getting back into the good graces of their chief.

Dick Branch raved and cursed and struggled against his punishment to the full extent of his powers, but all was in vain. When Bill Trainor relinquished the "black-snake," another eager hand caught it up, to be "spelled" by another and still another. Only for Garl Orton, the miserable wretch would hardly have survived that terrible flogging.

Cutting his bonds and bidding him go, never to return, Orton cried:

"Now fer the other two whelps! Whar's Perry Sparks an' his dad?"

But no one seemed able to answer that question. Father and son had stolen away under cover of that repulsive scene!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH.

It seemed remarkably cozy and pleasant in the "living room" that night at General Winston's mountain home.

The lights were burning with a subdued brilliancy, so agreeable to those who feel in a thoughtful mood.

Mercy Winston was sitting at the upright piano, her birthday gift from Mose Hunter, and almost his first purchase with the money he "found" in the famous bee-tree alluded to by Ruth Orton. And the gallant mountaineer was very close to Mercy, just now, listening to the soft music her white fingers draw from the instrument, watching that proud, yet sweet face, with eyes that no longer sought to conceal the love-light so precious to her heart.

Owen Price was seated in an easy-chair, of rustic manufacture, seemingly lost in a lazy doze, though he flashed an occasional keen glance over to the corner where Jerome Winston and Robin Kendrick were seated together, conversing in low, guarded tones.

The two refugees had received a fairly cordial welcome when, the night before, Mossback Mose guided them to the mountain home. Mercy was shyly frank in her greeting, and General Winston seemed almost painfully anxious to make them welcome.

But there was something in his manner, his covert, almost scared glances toward Kendrick whenever he fancied himself unobserved, that at once put the fighting pigmy on his guard.

"You're trying to hide something," he mentally decided, at once. "What is it? Do you hate Kendrick, or is it fear? If fear, born of what reason? You'll do to keep an eye on, my gentle rebel!"

That watchful eye had not been lacking, since

then, and the more he watched the old soldier, the more puzzled Price became. That something was wrong, he felt was beyond question; but, what that something could be, he found it impossible to even guess.

Nothing had occurred during the day just past to alarm the two refugees. None of the moonshiners came near the house, with the single exception of Garl Orton, who "just dropped in" to give an account of the manner in which Dick Branch had been rewarded for his officiousness. And he had departed, after advising the chums to keep strictly in-doors, biding their time until he could fully win the Hillers over to a fair view of the case.

The giant moonshiner, now that he felt convinced Robin Kendrick was indeed the son of his old commander, had cast out all his past suspicions and doubts. No man of that true blood could be either a traitor or a spy!

It had been to solve these very doubts that he had taken his hurried departure from the look-out, as elsewhere noted. And now General Winston knew the truth: that this was indeed his son, whom he had not seen for more than twenty years! And he knew that Uriah Sparks had maliciously lied to him in claiming that Perry Sparks was that son.

Helonged to claim the strong, handsome, frank, manly looking fellow, as his son, yet he dared not! And he inwardly cursed the hot temper and evil counsels which had, long years ago, built up a barrier of blood between himself and his only child.

It was only now that Jerome Winston plucked up courage enough to touch upon that past tragedy, although he had been longing to do so ever since Robin Kendrick first crossed his threshold. He felt that he must learn the whole truth; and yet, he feared that knowledge would kill him!

He had suffered so much. His health was so terribly shattered by long years of bitter brooding over the black and sinful past!

"Do you know, Mr. Kendrick," he said, slowly, bending his head and shading his eyes with one hand, as a man sometimes will when striving to recall the dim past. "Your name sounds familiar to me. It seems as though I must have heard of or met some one bearing it long ago."

"You were in the army, I believe, sir?"

"I fought for the Lost Cause—yes!"

"So did my father," softly added Robin, his handsome face growing a shade graver. "Mr. Orton remembered him, last night. He said he was a member of my father's regiment."

"I seldom feel like talking of my army life, so it's not strange that Orton—I reckon I must have heard of your father, during the war. He—is still living?"

Kendrick made no immediate reply, and Winston shivered silently as, through his slightly parted fingers, he noted that altered look. Surely it was hard, cold, even stern? Surely a loving son would never wear that expression while thinking of a loved, respected parent?

"No, he died before the war ended."

Only that. No mention of how he came by his death; whether of disease or in battle. A far less keen observer would have seen that Kendrick was reluctant to pursue that subject further, but Winston was driven on by a feverish longing to know the very worst that could befall. He had kept his terrible secret so many weary years! And ever since the ugly past had been so rudely revived by Uriah Sparks, he had been half distracted.

That villain had lied flatly to him in swearing that his wife had died—had killed herself on hearing of the death of Carroll Kendrick at the hands of his half-brother, her husband. Or—had he been lying yesterday, when swearing that she had lived for years after that tragedy?

Was there no possible method of learning the whole truth, short of actually declaring himself? He shrunk from that; he feared to be repudiated by this gallant fellow—as a vile assassin!

"I believe I recall him, now," slowly said Winston, pressing his fingers lightly over his eyes, apparently concentrating his thoughts. "His first name was Carroll—yes! I distinctly recall him! Carroll Kendrick! And he was your—your father?"

Robin turned his face aside, his right hand—the only one visible to those eager, yearning eyes—clenching fiercely. And his low tones were heard and even harsh as he answered:

"My father's name was Gordon. He had a half-brother, named Carroll. You must have known uncle, I should judge."

"It may be so. Was your uncle in the army?"

"No, sir. He was engaged in business when the war broke out, and he never joined. He was still a merchant when—when he died."

"Dead? I had hoped—if he was still alive—pardon me, Mr. Kendrick, if I have inadvertently wounded your feelings, but—"

"You could not know, of course, dear sir," turning with a faint smile and slight bow. "It is a very painful story, and all the more so to me because I have yet a solemn vow unfulfilled. I promised my mother—"

"You still have a living parent, then?" interrupted Winston, his voice strangely eager, though so low and strained.

"No. My mother died, nearly fourteen years ago. It was to her that I made the sacred pledge, which I have not yet been able to keep."

"I am so sorry that I touched on such a painful subject, but—I live so remote from the world, and your name recalled—will you pardon me?"

There was a brief struggle, but Kendrick as quickly conquered his reluctance to speak further on that subject.

"There is nothing to pardon, General Winston. You have a perfect right to demand far more than I have told you, as yet. You have already shown a far greater trust in receiving us, strangers and accused of being spies, beneath your hospitable roof. I will tell you what oath I took, and what led up to it, if I may."

"If it will be too painful—"

"It ought not to be," with a short, almost bitter laugh. "It has had ample time to grow familiar as a bosom friend! I've hardly lost sight of it since early childhood!"

"If earnest sympathy can help you, dear sir," faintly murmured the old man, once more shading his eyes, as though the light pained them. "That, at least, will not be lacking on my part."

"Sympathy can do little good, I fear," smiling faintly. "You shall judge. My uncle was murdered—shot down on the street, in St. Louis, without a chance to defend himself. The assassin fled, and made his escape, nor has he been heard of since. The shock killed my mother, though she lingered for a number of years. Killed her, I say, and she said the same!"

"On her death-bed she bade me never give over until I had run the murderer down, and fully avenged the death of Uncle Carroll. I gave her my solemn pledge to carry out her wishes. I have failed, up to now, but I'll find him, yet! And then—"

"He may be dead. He may have sincerely repented, if still living. If so—would you still show him no mercy? Could no plea shake your hatred? Would you still kill him?"

"Like a mad-dog!" fiercely breathed Kendrick, springing to his feet, too thoroughly excited to remain seated.

He started across the room, toward the piano, only to sink in his tracks as a shot came through the open window!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SWIFT RETRIBUTION.

IN making that sudden change of position, Robin Kendrick had placed himself in almost a direct line drawn from the window to where Mossback Mose stood beside Mercy Winston, so that when the mountaineer turned at that explosion, he could see neither flash nor smoke, until Kendrick, with a gasping moan, sunk to the floor in a limp and nerveless heap, blood starting out on his breast.

His fall revealed the little cloud of vapor in front of the open window; but, Mossback Mose did not require any such clue; he was already crossing the room, and in his hand gleamed a drawn revolver.

His legs and body doubled up into a huge ball, and like some missile hurled from a mighty catapult, the Bald Hornet shot through the window, giving vent to his fiercest buzz as he made the leap.

Like a tiny shadow the fighting pigmy followed after the giant, grief and rage mingling in his shrill cry:

"Kill—kill 'em! They've murdered Rob!"

Mossback Mose struck the earth squarely on his feet, and as he did so, his blazing eyes fell upon two human figures running at top speed across a moonlighted stretch of ground, heading for the shadows which lay just before the nearest cover. Once there, with night to lend its aid, and—

A stream of fire leaped from the revolver leveled by the giant mountaineer, one shot following another with amazing rapidity. And with a sharp, agonized screech, one of those two fleeing figures came heavily to the ground, just as Owen Price regained his footing sufficiently to open fire, likewise.

The second fugitive did not pause an instant, but seemingly caring naught for the fate of his fellow-assassin, he bent every nerve to gain the friendly darkness, where he might hope—

With hardly an instant's cessation or break in that prolonged report, Mossback Mose shifted empty for fresh revolver, now running forward swiftly, bearing his weight on his toes, keeping his knees bent, to avoid as much as possible ruining his aim by sudden jars.

It was shooting at a flying target by night, with the moon veiled by mist-like, fleecy clouds, and the marvel was not that so many bullets went astray, but that any should find its proper billet.

Safety seemed assured the surviving assassin, for he was not more than his own length distant from both shade and cover, while as yet he had not been touched by lead. One mighty leap—one shot from each of his pursuers—then silence!

Mossback Mose sped on, true as a hound on a breast-high scent, and plunged into the shadow at the very point where that flying figure had faded from his sight. Then—he tripped and fell headlong, with an involuntary cry.

Light and agile though he was, Owen Price had found himself unable to keep pace with Mossback Mose. He slackened up a bit as he neared the villain who had fallen in the moonlight, but he saw that the wretch was too badly crippled to escape, and catching that cry from the lips of the mountaineer, he pressed on, sending in advance the shout:

"Hold your grip, Mose! I'm coming to— Glory to the Fates!"

For out of the shadow came Mossback Mose, dragging an unresisting shape after him, by a savage grip on one arm.

"I knowed it!" Hunter grated harshly, after a swift look by the aid of the moon. "Perry Sparks! Whar's t'other devil?"

"Back there—alive and—"

"He won't be much longer," muttered Mose, spurning the corpse with a brutality foreign to his nature, plainly betraying how poorly satisfied his vengeance was by this speedy punishment.

"Don't kill—make him confess—"

"Perry—son—where are ye?"

The crippled wretch strove to rise and flee as he seemed to recognize the avengers, but before he could fairly regain his feet, Mose was upon him, holding him dangling at arm's length, writhing and squirming in that terrible grip like a human worm.

Again Owen Price pleaded, not for mercy, but for time in which to force a full confession; and after a short but fierce struggle with his longing to crush the last remnant of life from that miserable carcass, the mountaineer yielded.

By this time Aunt Chloe and Uncle Harvey were on the scene, and bidding them drag the corpse back to the house, Mose bore his wounded captive back to the scene of the murder, actual or attempted.

Owen Price was ahead of him here, and to his intense joy he found Kendrick, wounded, 'tis true, but far from being a dead man.

When Mossback Mose learned as much, his terrible thirst for vengeance seemed to abate, and turning the crippled captive over to General Winston, he set off at top speed for a doctor.

Jerome Winston shrunk involuntarily from the crippled knave, when he fairly recognized the yellow, haggard face of Uriah Sparks, but with a desperate effort he rallied his strength and courage, bending over the motionless figure.

"I don't reckon he's dead," said Owen, catching that muffled groan, and giving it the most natural interpretation. "Mose didn't stop to put on gloves, and maybe shook the rascal up a bit more than was strictly necessary. He'll live long enough to confess, I'm thinking."

Did the old soldier really wish for that to come to pass? He could hardly answer that question, himself, during these first few minutes of excited doubts and dreads.

The instinct of an old soldier was aroused, though, and he did what lay in his power for the wounded wretch. He found that one leg was badly shattered at the knee, while another bullet lost itself near the middle of his body; a simple-seeming wound, but Winston knew that this was far more dangerous to life than the other injury, though that looked so much the worse.

Having checked the flow of blood as much as possible, Winston had Uncle Harvey aid him in bearing Uriah Sparks to a bed in the negro cabin, strangely reluctant to permit the assassin to find rest under the same roof with his almost victim.

Owen Price found able and willing assistants in Mercy and Aunt Chloe, when he had convinced them that Robin was far short of being a corpse, and when Jerome Winston returned to offer aid, he found all was going well. The wound, though severe enough, did not actually threaten life, and with proper care and nursing, Kendrick would soon be himself.

Winston, unable to resist the temptation, soon went back to where he had left Uriah Sparks under care of Uncle Harvey. The wounded man had roused from his swoon, and was calling for his boy, his idolized son.

It seemed a terrible shock to him when Winston made known the fate of Perry Sparks, and the old soldier sent Uncle Harvey away, remaining alone with the crippled wretch.

Fortunately Mossback Mose had not far to go for the doctor, and in much less time than any one dared expect his return, he was back with medical assistance.

Kendrick was attended to first, as a matter of course, and after dressing his wound, the physician declared that he stood in no danger, provided he kept quiet and avoided excitement.

It was far different with Uriah Sparks. He was raving wildly, his mind running mainly on his son. He begged him not to risk a shot—to wait for a more favorable opportunity—and then seemed struggling with Perry, like one trying to prevent a shot.

The doctor shook his head gravely in answer to that inquiring look from the general—it needed no second glance to reveal what sure work was being wrought by that body-shot.

He gave the crippled wretch a potion that soon calmed him, in body if not in mind, and shortly afterward, realizing that his son was dead, and that his own span of life was very

short, Uriah Sparks made full and ample confession.

Perry had aimed at Mossback Mose, driven to fury by his devotion to Mercy. Uriah had caught his hand, too late to check the shot, but saving Mose at the expense of Kendrick.

Then, with the remorse which so frequently overwhelms hardened sinners when death draws near them, Dexter Cane—to give him his right name, and the name under which he had wrought so much evil—laid bare the hideous past, taking upon his own soul the awful burden which had for so many long, weary years weighted down that of his one-time friend and benefactor.

Ghastly pale, but stronger in mind and body than he had been for years, Gordon Kendrick—no longer Jerome Winston—begged the doctor to write out that confession in full.

While this was being done, Kendrick kept up the failing powers of his dying enemy, by administering drugs prescribed by the medical man, whose pen was flying swiftly over the paper. And, when the end was reached, and Dexter Cane had signed his name at the bottom, the old soldier rushed from the cabin with a sobbing cry of great joy!

He fought for composure before entering the chamber where Robin Kendrick was resting, and in a measure regained it, though his voice was far from clear or steady, as he bent over the bed and asked:

"Robin, my own boy! Who killed your uncle, Carroll Kendrick?"

"Dexter Cane!" was the startled response.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TREASURE FOUND AT LAST.

GORDON KENDRICK was too greatly agitated to say more, but he gave that written confession to Owen Price, begging him to read it to the wounded young man.

Owen complied, at least so far as to make a beginning; but a stop was put to this rash proceeding by the doctor, who noted the growing excitement in his patient.

"To-morrow, not now," was his decision; and all yielded to it.

Before that morrow dawned, Dexter Cane had gone to join his son.

There was no mourning on his account. A sinner he had lived, a sinner he died. He had few friends while living, and not one when death claimed him for its own.

Yet he had made what poor amends lay in his power, fully and freely explaining all obscure points on which he was questioned.

For one thing, he told how near Mossback Mose had guessed when he said he believed Perry Sparks followed him to St. Louis expressly to rob him of that treasure-map. His money hired those thugs, who played their employer false, hoping to profit by the treasure themselves.

And the treasure-map had been taken from Robin Kendrick, just as detailed, those forged commissions being substituted, the more surely to remove a dangerous obstacle from their path.

It was a tragic story which Robin Kendrick read, a few days later, signed by the prime sinner, Dexter Cane.

It need not be given in full, at this late hour. To do so would be to repeat much that has been told in earlier pages, and at best it is an unpleasant subject.

Gordon Kendrick was far from being guiltless, though his worst crime lay in giving ear to a malicious devil who, having failed to win the love of a married woman, tried to get even by maligning her to her husband.

Gordon Kendrick was born in the South; his mother was Southern born and bred; and when the war broke out, he cast his lot with his native State.

His father had married twice, his second wife being a native of Maine. Her son, Gordon's half-brother, was as enthusiastic for the North as Gordon was for the South, and Mrs. Gordon Kendrick had strong Union sympathies.

She had been quite rich before marriage, and that property was all north of the dividing line, so it was quite natural that she should be left there, with her only child, a son.

This separation gave Dexter Cane his chance to sow discord, and he lost no opportunity of so doing. He quickly poisoned the mind of the Confederate soldier, and found plenty of (seeming) confirmation in the strong affection which united the half-brother and his sister-in-law.

At length Gordon Kendrick, driven to the verge of insanity by those devilish slanders, risked his life to enter the lines of the enemy in disguise, and after being still further maddened by Dexter Cane, met and attacked Carroll Kendrick on the street, opening fire with only a brief warning to defend himself.

Carroll fell, bleeding profusely, and Dexter Cane hurried the soldier off and out of town. But so far from dying then, Carroll Kendrick fully recovered, to meet his death at Cane's hands, more than two years later!

This crime was brought on by Kendrick's discovery of the double treachery so long played by the crafty villain, and while resolved to fully

punish him for his evil deeds, he made the manly mistake of first offering Cane the chance to explain, if possible.

Instead, Cane shot Kendrick down without warning, managing to escape during the intense excitement following the assassination.

He eluded all pursuit, and, changing his name, for a long time lost all trace of the surviving Kendricks. Perry was his own son, and not until many years later, after discovering Gordon Kendrick in Jerome Winston, did the plot afterward attempted, shape itself in his evil brain. And that, as we have seen, went no further than taking the first steps toward foisting off a false son and heir on the man whose later life his dastardly crimes had ruined.

This, in substance, comprised that confession, and it gave Robin Kendrick subject for many an hour's reflection.

He, on his part, readily explained the emotion he had betrayed when the old soldier questioned him concerning the death of his father. That death had never been proven, and only accepted when, after long and fruitless search, nothing could be learned concerning Colonel Kendrick. On fleeing from his bleeding brother he had changed his name to Winston, enlisting in another division, avoiding all past acquaintances as much as possible. And hence it came that no trace of Gordon Kendrick could be found.

Before her death, Mrs. Kendrick told her son everything: even to the belief her husband entertained as to her falseness to her wifely vows. She would not believe her husband dead, but she feared he would never be found by his son.

She urged him to spare no pains in his quest, bidding him bear her dying assurance of perfect love and unbroken faith to Gordon Kendrick. And then, too, she exacted another pledge: to never rest easy until Dexter Cane was fully punished for his manifold sins.

In justice to himself and Mercy, Gordon Kendrick only waited until Robin was strong enough, before revealing a secret which had, up to that hour, been confined to Mercy and himself. She was not his own child, but the daughter of an old comrade-in-arms, who, dying almost as the final shot was fired in that internecine strife, left his baby girl to the friend who received his latest breath. It was a sacred charge, which had been sacredly kept, ever since.

This revealed, there remains little more to add.

Armed with the full confession made by "Uriah Sparks," Garl Orton and Mossback Mose found little difficulty in convincing the Hillers that Robin Kendrick and Owen Price were not in the revenue service, and many a rough, rugged moonshiner called at "the giner's house" to ask pardon for the mistake they had been led into by lying tongues.

Of course this was freely accorded, and from that time the two chums were given "the freedom of the Ozarks!"

Owen Price lingered there until Robin Kendrick was out of danger, but as he saw that his chum had no particular desire to cut his sojourn short—as why should he, having two such charming nurses?—the fighting pigmy bade all farewell, going back to his city home and duties.

Gordon Kendrick would not listen to returning to the city. He was wedded to his wild, mountain home and life, and Robin gracefully yielded to his wishes after a confidential talk with Ruth Orton.

There was a double marriage in the Ozarks, one bright day, at which every Hiller from scores of miles around was a welcome guest. And while Mercy Winston was turned into a "Mrs. Bald Hornet," Ruth Orton likewise took upon herself another name, just as dearly loved, if not quite so "Ozarkian."

Gordon Kendrick lived barely long enough to greet his first grandchild, then passed away, happy in the belief that, having so bitterly repented in this world, he would find perfect forgiveness in the next.

Robin Kendrick put a stop to all illicit distilling in that section, by the simple, if costly, process of erecting a building in which, duly licensed by law, Garl Orton could quietly carry on his old business on an extensive scale. And when this property was fully invested in the giant moonshiner, Robin and Ruth turned their faces toward civilization together.

As for Dick Branch, he took the grim advice given him while his pains were sharpest, and never returned to the Ozarks.

Mossback Mose has not entirely forgotten his fantastic war-cries, though he rarely exercises his peculiar talents that way, save for the amusement of his children, who are as robust and fun-loving as they are numerous—so numerous, as the years roll by, that he frequently declares that he certainly will have to hunt up another bee-tree!

But Mercy, taking pattern after the fighting pigmy, as often declares that he will search in vain, for:

"Rob Kendrick found the treasure, don't you know?"

THE END.

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Ossian's Address to the
Independence Bell—1777,
The Neck,
Foggy Thoughts,
The Ladies' Man,
Life,
The Idler,
The Unbeliever,
The Two Lives,
The True Scholar,
Judges not Infallible,
Fanaticism,
Instability of Successful
Agriculture, [Crime,
Ireland,
The People Always Con-
Music of Labor, [quer,
Prussia and Austria,
Wishing,

John Burns, Gettysburg,
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Miss Prude's Tea-Party,
The Power of an Idea,
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Suffrage, [Sea,
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The Sea, the Sea, the open
Star Bangled Spanner,
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Life's What You Make It,
Where's My Money,
Speech from Conscience,
Man's Relation to Society
The Limits to Happiness,

New England and Union,
The Unseen Battlefield,
Plea for the Republic,
America, [Fallacy,
"Right of Secession" a
Life's Sunset,
Human Nature,
Lawyers,
Wrongs of the Indians,
Appeal in behalf of Am.
Miseries of War, [Liberty,
A Lay Sermon,
A Dream,
Astronomical,

Good-nature a Blessing,
Sermon from Hard-shell
Tail-enders, [Baptist,
The Value of Money,
Meteoritic Disquisition,
Be Sure You are Right,
Be of Good Cheer,
Crabbed Folks, [Shrew,
Taming a Masculine
Farmers, [Our Country,
The True Greatness of
The Cold-water Man,
Permanency of States,
Liberty of Speech,

The Moon, [zens,
Duties of American Citi-
The Man,
Temptations of Cities,
Broken Resolutions,
There is no Death,
Races,
A Fruitful Discourse,
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It Is Not Your Business.

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What Was Learned,
Press On,
The Horse,
The Snake in the Grass,
Wolf and Lamb,
Lion in Love,
Frogs Asking for a King,
Sick Lion,
Country and Town Mice,
Man and Woman,
Home,
The Lotus-Planter,
Little Things,
A Baby's Soliloquy,
Repentance,
A Plea for Eggs,
Humbug Patriotism,
Night After Christmas,
Short Legs,
Shrimps on Amusements,
How the Raven Became
Black,
A Mother's Work,
The Same,
Who Rules,
A Sheep Story,
A Little Correspondent,
One Good Turn Deserves
My Dream, [Another,
Rain,
I'll Never Use Tobacco,
A Mosaic,
The Old Bachelor,

Tale of the Tropics,
Bromley's Speech,
The Same, second extract
The Fisher's Child,
Shakspearian Scholar,
A Maiden's Psalm of Life,
A Mixture,
Plea for Skates,
Playing Ball,
Ah, Why,
Live for Something,
Lay of the Hen-Pecked,
The Outside Dog,
Prayer to Light,
Little Jim,
Angelina's Lament,
Johnny Shrimps on Boots
Mercy,
Choice of Hours,
Poor Richard's Sayings,
Who Killed Tom Roper,
Nothing to Do,
Honesty Best Policy,
Heaven,
Ho for the Fields,
Fashion on the Brain,
On Shanghaish,
A Smile,
Casabianca,
Homoeopathic Soup,
Nose and Eyes, [Come.
Malt, A Hundred Years to
The Madman and he,
Little Sermons, [Razor,
Snuffles on Electricity,
The Two Cradles,
The Ocean Storm,
Do Thy Little—Do it Well
Little Puss,
Base-Ball, [Fever,
Prescription for Spring

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A Hard-shell Sermon,
The Boots,
The Squeezer,
Noah and the Devil,
A Lover's Luck,
Hifalutin Adolphus,
Digestion and Paradise,
Distinction's Disadvant-
Smith, [ages,
Gushalina Bendibus,
A Stock of Notions,
Speaking for the Sheriff,
Daking a Shwheat,
Then and Now,
Josh Billings's Lecturing,
Doctor De Blister's Ann't,
Consignments,
Hard Lives,
Dan Bryant's Speech,
A Colored View,
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Nobody,
Train of Circumstances,
Good Advice,
The Itching Palm,

Drum-head Sermons,
Schnitzer's Philosophedis
"Woman's Rights,"
Luke Lather,
The Hog,
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New England Tragedy,
The Ancient Bachelor,
Jacob Whittle's Speech,
Jerks Prognosticates,
A Word with Snooks,
Sut Lovengood,
A Mule Ride,
Josh Billings on Buzzers,
Il Trovatore,
Kissing in the Street,
Scandalous,
Slightly Mixed,
The Office-seeker,
Old Bachelors,
Woman,
The Niam Niams,
People Will Talk,
Swackhamer's Ball,
Who Wouldn't be Fire' -
Don't Depend on Daddan,
Music of Labor,
The American Ensign.

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Local Rules of Debate,
Subjects of Discussion.
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Why there are few good
Debaters,
Prerequisites to Oratori-
cal Success,
The Logic of Debate,
The Rhetoric of Debate,
Maxims to Observe,
The Preliminary Premise,
Order of Argument,
Summary.
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Ordinary Meetings and
Assemblies,
The Organization,

Order of Business and
Proceedings,
The "Question." How it
can be Treated,
The "Question." How to
be Considered,
Rights to the Floor,
Rights of a Speaker as
Against the Chair,
Calling Yeas and Nays,
Interrupting a Vote,
Organization of Delibera-
tive Bodies, Conven-
tions, Annual or Gen-
eral Assemblies,
Preliminary Organization
Permanent Organization,
The Order of Business,
Considering Reports, Pa-
pers, etc.,
Of Subsidiary Motions,
The Due Order of Cn-
sidering Questions,
Committees,

The Dime Speakers.

Objects of a Committee,
Their Powers,
How Named,
When Not to Sit,
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How to Report,
The Committee of the Whole,
Miscellaneous,
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Debate in full:

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The Orator of the Day,
The Heathen Chinese,
The Land we Love,
Jim Bludso,
Be True to Yourself,
Ah Sin's Reply,
A Plea for Smiles,
The Stanislaus Scientific Free Italy, [Society,
Italy's Alien Ruler,
Curse of One Man Power,
Treaty of Peace (1814),
The Critical Moment,
The East and the West,
Is There any Money in it?
Are we a Nation?
Social Science,
Influence of Liberty,
The Patriot's Choice,
The Right of the People,
The Crowning Glory,
The Pumpkin,
When You're Down,
What England Has Done
The Right of Neutrality,
The National Flag,
Our True Future,

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Dishonesty of Politics,
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Character and Achievement,
"I Can't,"
"It Might Have Been,"
Don't Strike a Man When Down,
On Keeping at It,
Treasures of the Deep,
Keep Cool,
The Precious Freight,
A Sketch,
Sword the True Arbitrator,
Aristocracy,
Baron Grimalkin's Death
Obed Snipkins,
A Catastrophe,
Cheerfulness,
Mountains,
Last Lay of the Minstrel,
The Unlucky Lovers,
The Dread Secret,
Civil Service Reform,

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Courting,
Higher,
The Closing Year,
The Maniac's Defense,
The Hen Scratches,
Ass and the Violinist,
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Bachelors and Flirts,
Job's Turkey,
A Hardshell Sermon,
My First Knife,
Der Loddery Dicket,
A Canni-Ballad,
Woman's Rights,
What's the Matter,
Mrs. Jones's Pirate,
De Goose,
Touch of the Sublime,
Blooded Van Snoodle,
Blast Against Tobacco,
Tobacco Boys,
Big Geniuses,
My First Cigar,
Terrible T'-tale,
Silver Wedding,
Prohibition,

Karl Pretzel's Komikal Speaker No. 15

Schandal,
Don'd Been Afraid,
Gamboling,
Indembrace,
Gretchen und Me go Oud,
Hope. Das ish vat it ish,
"Dot Musquiter,"
Leedle Gal-child's Dream
Dhere Vas no Crying,
Leedle Speedches,
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Debates in Brief:
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II. Are Lawyers a Benefit or a Curse to Society?

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Latin.

Gravelotte,
All Hail!
Emancipation of Science,
Spirit of Forgiveness,
Amnesty and Love,
Beauty,
Song of Labor,
Manifest Destiny,
Let It Alone!
Disconcerted Candidate,
Maud Muller After Hans Breitman,
What Is True Happiness?
The Irish of It. A parody
What We See in the Sky
What I Wish,
Good Manners,
A Ballad of Lake Erie,
Suffrage,
The Caucasian Race,
A Review of Situation,
Little Breeches, [ding,
Hans Donderbeck's Wedding
A Victim of Toothache,
Story of the Twins,
A Cold in the Nose,
My Uncle Adolphus.

The True Gentleman,
The Tragic Pa,
SABBATH-SCHOOL PIECES.
A Cry for Life,
The Sabbath,
Gnarled Lives,
A Good Life,
To Whom Shall We Give Thanks?
Resolution,
Never Mind,
The Bible,
Christianity Our Bulwark,
The Want of the Hour,
The Midnight Train,
The Better View,
Do Thy Little—Do it Well
Jesus Forever,
The Heart,
The World,
Beautiful Thoughts,
A Picture of Life,
Be True to Yourself,
Young Man,
Time is Passing,
The Gospel of Autumn,
Speak Not Harshly,
Courage,
The Eternal Hymn,
Live for Good,
The Silent City.

Unlucky,
Queer People,
Biting One's Nose Off,
Golden Rules,
The Singular Man,
Fourth of July Oration,
Cheer Up,
Self-Esteem,
Buckwheat Cakes,
Twain's Little Boy,
A Word with You,
A Chemical Lament,
The Candy-Pulling,
Contentment,
On Courting,
On Laughing,
The Tanner Boy,
On Wimmen's Rights,
The Healer,
The Criminal Lawyer,
Ballad of Matilda Jane,
Water,
The Ballad of a Baker,
Good for Something,
A Moving Sermon.

Sorrowful Tale,
The Loafer's Society,
It's the Early Bird, etc.,
Music,
On Lager Beer,
Caudle's Wedding Day,
Dot Young Viddow,
The Best Cow in Peril,
Frequent Critters,
In for the Railroad,
Song of the Sink,
Case of young Bangs,

Address to a School,
His Sphere,
Translations from Esop,
The Treachery of Jones,
Don't Call a Man a Liar,
Man. A Lecture,
Bu'st. A "Dialect,"
Simon Short's Son Sam,
Reckermember der Poor,
Natural History Views,
The Cart before the Horse
To See Ourselves,

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A Call to the Field,
To Retailers,
War, War to the Death,
Adjuration to Duty,
The Crusader's Appeal,
A Boy's Testimony,
I Have Drank My Last
The Spirit-Siren,
Rum's Maniac,
Life is What we Make it,
Taste Not,
The Evil Beast,
Help,
The Hardest Lot of All,
The Curse of Rum,
The Two Dogs. A fable,
The Source of Reform,
The Rum Fiend,
True Law and False,
In Bad Company,
The Only True Nobility,
The Inebriate's End,

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An Adjuration,
The Kings of Business,
Purity of Speech,
Parson Caldwell,
Value of Reputation,
Hand that Rocks World,
Swelling Manhood,
Summer,
Woman's Love,
The Bricklayers,
Words of Silver,
Drive on! Drive on!
The Tramp,
The State Immortal,
The Moral Factor,
Walking with the World,
The only Safety,
Knowledge,
Be Careful what you Say
Something to Shun,
Plea for Ireland,
Smile Whene'er you Can,
The Wood of Stars,
A Thought,
The Housemaid,
The Goblin Cat,
Aristocrats,
The Knightly Newsboy,

Hail Columbia Speaker, No. 18.

Columbia,
Washington,
Appeal for Liberty,
The American Hero,
Resistance to Oppression,
Patriotism,
Green Mountain Boys,
Eloquence of Otis,
Washington,
America Must be Free,
Freedom the Only Hope,
Day of Disinfranchisement,
No Alternative but Liberty,
Carmen Bellicosum, [ty,
Sword of Bunker Hill,
The Fourth of July,
Warren's Address,
A Call to Liberty,
Good Faith,
Revolutionary Soldiers,
Our Responsibility,
British Barbarity,
How Freedom is Won,
Adams and Liberty,
Our Duties,
Our Destiny,
The American Flag,
The True Union,
American Independence,
Washington and Franklin

Serio-Comic Speaker, No. 19.

The American Phalanx,
The Same,
The Old Canoe,
Room at the Top,
New England Weather,
Bluggs,
Leedle Yawcob Strauss,
A Fable,
The Tramp's Views,
Moral Littleness,
Yawcob Hoffeltteggobbe,
The Setting Sacchem,
Street Arab's Sermon,
Address to Young Ladies,
A Little Big Man,
The Test of Friendship,
The Price of Pleasure,
Sour Grapes,
The Unwritten "Claws,"
The Ager,

The Illinois Assembly,
The Cannibal Man,
Boss Bagshaw,
Pretzel as a Soldier,
The Raccoon,
My Childhood,
Schneider's Ride,
Boy Suffrage,
Gardening,
He vas Dhinkin',
Abner Jones' Testimony,
By a Money Changer's.

A Drunken Soliloquy,
The Work to Do,
To Labor is to Pray,
The Successful Life,
Better Than Gold,
Seed-Time and Harvest,
Invocation to Cold Water Now,
The Great Lesson to
The Toper's Lament,
God's Liquor,
Value of Life Work,
"Accept the Situation,"
Died of Whisky,
A Story with a Moral,
Breakers Ahead,
Ichabod Sly,
Effects of Intemperance,
The Whisky Why is It,
Local Option,
Be Good to the Body,
Worth Makes the Man.

Stand by the Constit'n,
A True Friend,
The Mocking-Bird,
The Want of the Country
The Value of Virtue,
She Would be a Mason,
Evils of Ignorance,
The Use of Time,
Come Down,
Anatomical Lecture,
Minnetunkee,
The Printing Press,
The Sabbath,
Busybodies,
Anatomical Lecture 2,
A Blow in the Dark,
The Specter Caravan,
The True Saviors,
True Fame,
A Call to Vote,
The Modern Fraud,
Running for Legislature,
To a Young Man,
Heads,
The New Dispensation,
Turning the Grindstone,
Short Sermon.

Sink or Swim,
The Buff and Blue,
The Union,
The Martyr Spy,
Lexington,
Our Only Hope,
Declaration of Independence,
The Liberty Bell, [ence,
Washington's Attributes,
What We Are,
Our Great Trust,
God Bless our States,
Looking Backward,
Marion and His Men,
Liberty and Union,
A Noble Plea,
Original Yankee Doodle,
Wolfe's Address,
Watching for Montgom-
The National Ensign, [ery
God Save the Union,
Our Natal Day,
The 22d of February,
New England's Dead,
Repeal! Repeal!
The True Hero,
Old Ironsides,
Our Gifts to History,
Uncle Sam's a Hundred,
Centennial Oration.

The Little Orator,
Pompey Squash,
Mr. Lo's New Version,
The Midnight Express,
Morality's Worst Enemy,
The Silent Teacher,
The Working People,
The Moneyless Man,
Strike Through the Knot,
An Agricultural Address,
The New Scriptures,
The Trombone,
Don't Despond,
The Mill Cannot Grind,
What Became of a Lie,
Now and Then,
How Ub vos Dot for High,
Early Rising,
Smart Boy's Opinion,
The Venomous Worm.

Fish,
Judge Not Thy Brother,
The Dog St. Bernard,
The Liberal Candidate,
A Boy's Opinion of Hens,
Good Alone are Great,
The Great Napoleon,
The Two Lives,
The Present Age,
At Midnight,
Good-night,
Truth,
The Funny Man,

Dime Select Speaker, No. 20.

God,
Save the Republic,
Watches of the Night,
The Closing Year,
Wrong and Right Road,
An Enemy to Society,
Barbara Freitche,
The Most Precious Gift,
Intellectual and Moral
Thanatopsis, [Power,
New Era of Labor,
Work of Faith,
A Dream,
La Dame Aux Camelias,
Penalty of Selfishness,
Lights Out,
Clothes Don't Make the
The Last Man, [Man,
Mind Your Own Business
My 4th o July Sentiments
My Esquimaux Friend,
Story of the Little Rid Hin
My Castle in Spain,
Shonny Schwartz,
The Indian's Wrongs,
Address to Young Men,
Beautiful Snow.

Dime Funny Speaker, No. 21.

Col. Sellers Elucidates,
Clory Mit Ter Sthars und
Stripes, [otism,
Terence O'Dowd's Patri-
Lime Kiln Club Oration,
Farmer Thornbush on
The Fiddler, [Fools,
The Regular Season,
The School Boy's Lament,
Dot Baby Off Mine,
Bluggs Once More,
Views on Agriculture,
One Hundred Years Ago,
De 'Sperience ob de Reb-
rend Quacko Strong,
A Dollar or Two,
On Some More Hash,
Where Money is King,
Prof. Dinkelspeigelmann
on the origin of Life,
Konzentrated Wisdom,
Joseph Brown and the
Mince Pie,
John Jenkins's Sermon,
A Parody on "Tell Me Ye
Winged Winds,"

Dime Jolly Speaker, No. 22.

Grandfather's Clock,
Tue XIXth Century,
Mary's Von Little Ram,
A Lecture on Science,
Old and New Time,
Clayfoot's Spirit Race,
The Village School,
A Sermon for the Sisters,
De Filosofy ob Fun,
Disappointed Discoverer,
A Heathen's Score,
Der Dog und der Lobster,
The Young Tramp,
Delights of the Season,
The Delights of Spring,
Josh Billings's Views,
Beasteses,
How tew Pik out a
Watermelon,
How tew Pik out a Dog,
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Readings and Recitations, No. 24.

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Dime Burlesque Speaker, No. 25.

Plenty Small's Proclama- tion, The Mother-in-Law, The Widow O'Shane's Rint, [Pro, Leatherlung's Con and A Cockney's Experience, The "Free and Equal" Humbug, [tions, Scipio Scroggs's Ques- The Treachery of Jones, Declamation, Shtichen Oats Dot's Wild, Treadwater Jim, A Leadville Sermon on the "Prod," Address to the Giantess, The Ass and the Lark, Tony Johnson's Protest, Watermelons, Very Pathetic, A Telling Plea, Back to Griggsby's, Advice to a Young Man, The Plagues of Egypt, Julius Caesar Sumner's Views, John Jones—His Horn, Sentiment, [Man, Bu'stin' the Temperance Ediket, The Scenes of Childhood, Sancho Brown is Mad, Pilkins's Landlady, The Collegian Illumin- ates, [Splain," Uncle Cuff "Rises fur ter Assorted Women, Like his Mother Used to Make, Set 'em Oud! Yankee Courtship,	The Day we Celebrate, Dot Fritzzy, The Critic at Work, Fortunate Flanders Shows his Teeth, Guilty, of Course, No More French, Animile Statistix, [For, Some Things Accounted The Cats, [tor, Astronomical Corusca- The Pcet Bold, January Jones Defends the Eagle, The Mule, [Liars, Brother Gardner on That Lamb, [Ticket, Peter and his Lottery The Mosquito Adjured, "That Birchen Tree," The Late Mr. Shakspeare, The Pie for Me, Buckeye Bill, [ing, Rev. Peter Bill's Warn- Jones's Wife's Aunt, A Rhyme of the Time, A Short Debate on Rum, The Good Woman, The Clerk of the Weather That Noble Animal, Man, The Bold Fisherman, Cudjo Hardsin's Pre- scription, A Tale of Two Buckets, Dot Hoboken Bucket, The Sale of Old Bachelors The Difference, Getting a Photograph, As Others See Us, The Cotton Field Hand, Signs of Summer, A "Fish Story,"
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